

# sani

FAYETTEVILLE, NC  
WWW.SANIDESIGNS.COM

Innovative, multifunctional designs coupled with a seamless shopping experience that makes cultural clothing more accessible.

2018 NC IDEA MICRO GRANT RECIPIENT



If you have ever been to a South Asian wedding celebration, you've surely noticed the colorful saris, lehengas and other traditional outfits that are accessorized with beautiful, glittering jewelry. In 2017, my sisters and I were shopping for one of those weddings. We noticed, as we had on previous shopping trips, there were not many designs that we liked, and the shopping experience was time consuming and expensive. When shopping in the US, we often had to travel to South Asian hubs like New York and Atlanta, but still didn't find styles that were multifunctional, up to date with trends and in our first-generation South Asian American aesthetic. We even tried shopping via video call with our family in India, but it just didn't work.

When we talked to others, we realized they too were settling for subpar designs and a subpar shopping experience, including in India, where the salespeople were often older men telling women what looked good. Hearing others talk about it was the final push. We started designing pieces with our peers and

generational counterparts in mind, with a shopping experience that reflected modern buying behaviors.

We heard about NC IDEA through different mentors involved in North Carolina's entrepreneurial ecosystem. In 2018, we applied for the MICRO grant with the idea to partner Sani with a wholesaler. After some coaching from the NC IDEA team, we determined that wholesaling was not the best route for our small business. Entrepreneurship is really about problem solving. It is finding new ways to make things better. We had to go through a lot of trial and error to find the best manufacturer with the quality and values that aligned with Sani's ethical practices.

With the grant funding, we decided to host an event that would create a community around the Sani brand. We were able to put on one of the biggest South Asian fashion shows in North Carolina with over three hundred attendees. We had food from different regions and different dance groups performed as we shared

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—NIKI SHAMDASANI  
CEO AND CO-FOUNDER

our culture with everyone. It was a great way to get our name out there and drive initial sales. Following our debut, we continued to bootstrap the company through online sales and word-of-mouth. Then one day in 2019, I took a chance and cold-emailed the CEO of Rent the Runway, an online service that provides designer dress and accessory rentals. Our collaboration with Rent the Runway launched in early 2020, making it the first time ever they offered South Asian fashion on their platform. Working alongside Rent the Runway has provided an incredible opportunity for Sani to make our fashions available to South Asian Americans while allowing us to share our rich, vibrant culture with everyone.



Our orders slowed due to the pandemic and many events were cancelled or postponed. Additionally, on the production side, things came to a standstill because India was on lockdown. Instead of just standing by, we focused on our ready-to-ship options for small orders and spent time updating our website to include customization and home try-ons. The temporary slowdown has also allowed us to work on developing new product categories that Sani can offer.

As young women and founders, it has been important for us to build trust to form our legitimacy. Moms are a big part of the process of purchasing cultural clothing. Since many mothers shop for these types of traditional pieces in India for their daughters, we have to make sure they trust our brand's quality and design.

We had a customer that really wanted one of our pieces, however, her mom was unsure because it was not the most traditional style. The daughter purchased it anyway and I personally delivered it to their house to make sure everything was fitting well. After trying it on, her mom just looked at her with a sudden realization and said, “I get it.” It was a tender bonding moment where they were able to really understand each other, but also understand the vision behind Sani. It is a moment I will always remember, as my entrepreneurial experience has always been about community.

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