



Elizabeth with some of Southwest Scotland RnR's guests: Corporal Hayes, Marine Mossy, Sergeant Anderson and Marine Britton at Carsethorn



HATS OFF

When world-renowned milliner Elizabeth Parker isn't making hats, she's cooking, cleaning and looking after wounded soldiers at Southwest Scotland RnR in Carsethorn. She tells **Anne Armstrong** about her work with her 'Gentle Giants of War'

Millinery pictures courtesy of Elizabeth Parker

Elizabeth Parker has two lives and they couldn't be more different. In her professional life as a world-renowned milliner, she crafts amazing hats for celebrity clients and her creations have appeared in top magazines such as Vogue. But for the last 18 months, she has also been giving up her time to cook, clean and look after wounded soldiers in Dumfries & Galloway.

Elizabeth has been putting prestigious clients on hold to travel regularly to the village of Carsethorn on the Solway coast, to lend a hand to Southwest Scotland RnR, the charity founded by brigadier's daughter Jennefer Tobin, which provides holidays for soldiers injured while on active service in Afghanistan and other conflicts around the world.

Jennefer has been opening her home,

The End House, to injured troops since 2009, inviting groups of 10 at a time to come and enjoy a week's activity holiday and good home cooking to help them relax, regain self-confidence and continue on their road to recovery. Despite a serious fire at The End House in February, Jennefer was able to welcome the first of this year's groups in May.

Elizabeth, who has been spending as much as two weeks a month at Carsethorn since May, says: "As a milliner I have worked with many amazing people worldwide, but working alongside these boys really is an honour that I will cherish for a lifetime. I call them my Gentle Giants of War and each one's smile I will remember always."

"What Jennefer does for the wounded is simply stunning. Such a woman with

Burlesque artist Dita Von Teese wearing one of Elizabeth's crystal-encrusted bowler hats



such a heart I have never met before."

York-based Elizabeth began making hats eight years ago as a single parent trying to earn "a few extra pennies" for Christmas. She says she was always drawn to create more unusual, quirky designs and after finishing her millinery course in Leeds, her work caught the eye of high-fashion magazine stylists and celebrities, and she "accidentally became famous".

"The hat, to me, is an extension of the client's personality," she says. "I just couldn't do anything average. I like to create a sculpture, not just a hat."

Elizabeth's hats can take up to a month to build and are all hand-blocked and hand-stitched, ranging in price from £500 to £2,000 for each one.

They have appeared in magazines such as Vogue, The Hat Magazine and The Times Magazine, and her celebrity clients include musicians Jools Holland, Goldfrapp, Faithless, Paloma Faith and Martina Topley Bird, and comedians The Mighty Boosh.

A bowler hat encrusted with over 6,000 Swarovski crystals was worn by American burlesque model and actress Dita Von Teese on the cover of Prestige magazine, and used in its Hong Kong, American, Asian and Russian editions. Elizabeth says: "This was indeed very special. Dita Von Teese is one of the most beautiful and glam ladies of our time."

It's safe to say that Elizabeth's time in Carsethorn is a world away from her hat designing. Her mum used to care for Jennefer's mum and it was through that connection the pair met, and Elizabeth began helping out at The End House.

Her days in Dumfries & Galloway start at 6am and finish at 10pm; she cooks all the meals, cleans and looks after the injured soldiers who enjoy a busy week of activities including water sports, carriage driving, falconry, archery and clay pigeon shooting.

She says: "It was a culture shock at first, after eight years of stitching hats in solitude, to arrive at Jennefer's with all the chaos and noise of 10 young men to look after."

"I organise and look after all their needs during their stay, and it is hard work and an emotional rollercoaster at times, but I ➤



Elizabeth with the Marines; below: some of her extravagant hat creations



‘I do find it hard not to shed a tear for them at times. It’s had a huge impact on me’



would not part with such a job. The marines have nicknamed me Cinderella in the Cellar as I constantly run around trying to help them out and keep Jennefer going through the week.

“I do find it hard not to shed a tear for them at times, as I see their struggle to get through what we would normally take for granted. It’s had a huge impact on me.”

In rare spare moments, usually late at night, Elizabeth has also put her millinery skills to good use in styling outfits and creating hats for Jennefer to wear at special occasions when she is raising awareness of the charity.

“The boys love to see Jennefer trying them on and can be found at times modelling the hats in mock catwalks up and down the hall,” she says.

So keen has Elizabeth been to spend as much time as possible at Carsethorn this



year, her hat clients have had to be patient: “I’ve been too busy to make hats due to my determination to make sure the combatants have the chance to smile again; and it takes a very determined client to get my attention these days.

“But they understand what I’m doing up here and most of them don’t mind waiting a little bit longer for a hat. To see a Marine smile through his pain and trauma is, to me, worth more than the winning lottery ticket.”

This year’s last expected group of

Marines visited Jennefer at the end of September, and Elizabeth has now headed home again to York and her 20-year-old daughter Sasha.

But she’ll definitely be back: “I adore Carsethorn’s beauty and peace and the people who hold this wonderful project together; I miss them all dearly each time I return home.

“Coming here makes you realise that the soldiers you see on TV are real people; a lot of them are the same age as the young models I work with.

“It really does hit home the horror of war and how an injury will affect a boy for the rest of his life.” D&G

■ *Southwest Scotland RnR has welcomed over 250 injured service personnel to Carsethorn since 2009. To find out more or to donate to the charity, see www.southwestscotlandrnr.org.uk.*