

Hats off to a woman true

A milliner whose designer hats are worn by the glitterati spurns the fashionable lifestyle of her peers. **Keith McDonald** reports on the achievements of a woman of ethics.



Miranda Green with an assortment of her creations. PICTURE: KEN MALEY.

Miranda Green knows all about doing it tough because she has had many crippling bouts of clinical depression. When you also consider that she left school at 15 and has no educational or professional qualifications, her achievement is even more remarkable.

She is a self-taught milliner, whose designer hats are in demand around the nation and whose exquisite creations also sell for up to \$625 in New York.

Running on courage, very much her own person, she is uneasy with the high society crowd and the high drama of the fashion industry. She is the antithesis of these glittery circles.

This "ethical activist", who is concerned about substance as well as style, blames the fashion industry for being a major contributor to undermining women's self-esteem. Battling her recurring health problems, she has a modest income, lives in a simple Fremantle flat, doesn't have a car and doesn't lead a champagne lifestyle.

She is more at home in Dharamsala, northern India, with poor, uneducated women and Tibetan Buddhists in exile. It is there that she has been working for much of this year, teaching her craft to ex-Buddhist monk Rabgay and local women like Jamyang Dolma.

"It doesn't bother me that the women buying my hats move in a different world and I don't aspire to be in their world," she says. "Instead I want to bring Jamyang's world to their world. I want them to know who makes the hats and how they are made."

Green, 45, went to school in Perth and at high school started suffering from depression. "I have had long periods of unwellness. Life was crazy until my 30s. I had such sorrow and I felt bad about who I was," she says.

Her turning point came when she found a doctor who "believed" in her and in 1990 put her on a course of medication that worked. He and his wife also encouraged her to utilise her creative talent and this led her to millinery.

Green tried a TAFE fashion dressmaking course. "I was severely agoraphobic and so the idea was scary for me," she says. She did not complete the course but it stimulated her interest in hats. From that, she developed some hat construction techniques. "I am self-taught," she says. "Most of it is trial and error. The course was only 16-20 hours."

In 1994 she started a millinery business but gave up after two years because of continuing health problems.

While recovering at her sister's in Melbourne, she worked on a weaving technique and started working it into

a hat design. "The meditative process of weaving the hat helped me," she says. "It gives you solace to do something repetitive and create something at the same time."

Since going back into business in 1997 as Miranda Green Millinery, she has been producing two seasonal collections a year for overseas outlets such as Samuels on New York's ritzy Fifth Avenue and private clients. She also sells locally and elsewhere in Australia.

This year Green took off for Dharamsala, in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, to "create a life-giving enterprise" and to do it in an ethical way.

The majestically beautiful Dharamsala, in the Outer Himalayas, is home to both the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile. Tibetan refugees, as well as Western Buddhists, flock there for an audience with the revered spiritual leader. "I have an affinity with Buddhist philosophy and wanted to be with people who are going to be kind to me," Green says, explaining why she decided to go there.

She set up a studio and met Rabgay in a cafe, where he worked as a cook. He had grown up in Chinese-occupied Tibet and was a monk for four years but fled his home country in 1999.

Green hired him to source material and help her deal with Indian

bureaucracy. She also started teaching him how to make hats. "He's a dream hand-stitcher," she says.

On her just-completed second visit, despite another bout of depression and having to return home early, Green made 50 hats — for her American winter range (\$350-\$625) and Australian summer range (\$75-\$120).

She also married Rabgay in a low-key ceremony; they plan to have a full ceremony in Perth when he gets permission to live here.

"The more unwell I became the more rock-solid he was," she says. "We realised we had become special to each other."

Although Green has fragile health, she is unbending on business ethics. She despairs of the "quiet acceptance" in the Western world of clothing sweatshops and consumers' quest for cheap prices, even though low prices usually come at a high ethical cost. Also, she says the fashion industry "artificially creates need by undermining women's self-esteem".

"By giving women a fixed way they are supposed to look, a particular size and look, it sets women up to not quite make the grade and also to compete against each other. It is an ideal and they are not going to make it," she says. "It all undermines women's self-esteem. Magazines show airbrushed images — you look in the mirror and feel you are falling short. It's a travesty. You feel robbed."

Instead of "16-year-old waifs", Green prefers amateurs to model her hats at parades and on her website. "I had a fashion parade last year," she says. "I used a variety of women, not paid models. They were aged from 25 to 61 and were a variety of sizes." It's her belief that using models such as these is more truthful, healthy and real.

Luisa Gordon, a 33-year-old Bibra Lake mother, responded five years ago to Green's newspaper advert for ordinary women to be models. She loved hats, had the right kind of hair and thought: why not? She does two photo shoots a year and also hits the catwalk for Green, all to the great delight of her family and friends.

"Everyone who has seen the photos says it's a shame people don't get to see more models like that," Gordon says. "If an average woman sees hats on an average woman, they think, 'That's what it's going to be like on me'."

Green's approach is enshrined in a mission statement that talks of "commitment to fair business exchanges, social responsibility and personal development", producing "both beautiful and durable items that can be marketed as investments



A professional model shows off one of Miranda Green's hats above a C Design swimsuit.

for a stylish and functional wardrobe" and embracing "the virtues of harmonious relationships as a prerequisite to attaining a successful and prosperous business".

Her objective is to "measure our success equally in terms of financial and linked prosperity, social responsibility and emotional and spiritual growth. To be a company which has a deep respect for the individual and the communities of which they are a part."

Murdoch University senior philosophy lecturer Peta Bowden, who invites Green to give a guest lecture to students doing an ethics, business and professions unit, is impressed.

"Her work is an integral part of her vision of what it is to lead an ethical life and in this sense ethics is not simply an add-on extra —

something to be mindful of in making business decisions — but her business activities are essentially practices of ethical activism: she uses her work to encourage and nurture ethical life in her community," Dr Bowden says.

She also says this takes great strength. "You are alone and standing out against things like the consumer culture. You could feel very isolated but Miranda is very committed to the power of one — that an individual can make a big difference," she says.

Miranda Green's hats are available at Parata, South Perth; Periscope, King Street; Studio 388, Subiaco; and Lindy Rosenwax, Nedlands. www.mirandagreenmillinery.com.au



Luisa Gordon in a Green design.

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