



STYLE

DERBY DARLING

An epiphany and strong will turned former singer Gena Conti into a sought-after milliner

BY KAREN BUSCEMI | PHOTO BY SAL RODRIGUEZ

GENA CONTI is no stranger to wowing fans. Starting in high school in Southgate, she did it by singing and writing music, touring around Michigan with religious musical groups — and was even offered financing for a career. In college, at Northern Michigan University, her sound got folkie, with a Joni Mitchell vibe.

But then she did the things she never thought she would: She got married and had children.

“After I had my kids, ... I turned into some crazy, wild mama lion,” she says, “and they just became my top priority.”

She tried to keep singing professionally at bars at night, even when she was divorced and raising her daughter and son, but it was too hard, and she gave up that dream.

For the next 13 years, the Wyandotte resident earned her living working as the director of catering for the Renaissance Club in Detroit while staying creative by making jewelry and hand-

▲ Gena Conti rocks a custom lemon-yellow and hunter-green velour felt hat (her own work, see more at genaconti.com); custom-made vintage green bakelite button earrings by J'ENvious from Updown in Wyandotte; and a measuring tape ring by MakeShift Accessories, also from Updown.

painting clothing in the evenings. Until she had an epiphany.

She wanted to make hats.

“So, I started like a lot of people do. You buy blank hats, and you decorate them up. And then I said, ‘Anybody can do this.’ ... I wanted to learn how to *make* the hat.”

That sent her on a journey — pre-internet — of researching, taking classes, and even accompanying her boyfriend on work trips so she could visit local milliners.

“I had two mentors I met on these travels,” she says. “I call them my fairy godparents of millinery. Rosie Kern in Chicago. She’s long gone. ... And Ian Deller. He was in Dallas, Texas. He’s gone, too.”

Conti says Kern allowed her to spend two weeks at her home learning from her and told Conti, “Honey, I don’t want to take anything to my grave that somebody else needs.”

When she could find classes, she took them, even auditing millinery classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Finally, she felt she had what it took to quit her job and become a milliner, which she’s been for the last 30 years.

Her busiest time is leading up to the Kentucky Derby, which is May 3 this year. The cutoff for orders is typically March 15, leaving her enough time to shop, mail fabric and trim swatches, communicate with customers, and then mail out the finished products all around the country. But she also has plenty of stunning ready-to-wear options for anyone late to the game.

Locally, she stays busy with luncheon fundraisers, especially the Hats Off Luncheon for the Suite Dreams Project (on May 16), where hats — or fascinators — are mandatory. She’s also sought out around the state by attendees of polo matches. (Can’t you just picture Julia Roberts’s brown polka-dot dress and wide-brimmed hat in *Pretty Woman*?)

Conti has created a dream work-live arrangement for herself in her sizable 1901 home. Guests can shop, sip tea, and have appointments on the main floor, open for appointments only — her office is also there. The lower level is her workspace, and she lives upstairs. A creative setup for a creative entrepreneur. 🧢