

NEWS FOCUS

# Giving to the heroes

When Dawn Woodhouse was inspired to start up Holidays for Heroes she had no idea it would lead to a mention in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. She told **Richard Heath** what the MBE means to her

It seemed that nothing much happened in the Woodhouse family on 2 May. Dawn stuffed goody bags for the former servicemen and their families who were staying in the Island that week while her husband, Richard, was working away in the charity's office – their spare room – upstairs. The only break in the weekly routine was a short phone call which Dawn would later record in her diary as 'Phone call from HE??'

And that, for the following six weeks, was pretty much all that officially happened to Dawn Woodhouse on 2 May 2012.

Her journey to national recognition began on Remembrance Day 2007, when she decided it would be nice to invite a few former servicemen who had been injured in action over to Jersey to enjoy a short holiday. The servicemen could, she thought, be put up in a spare room at their home in St Clement and could perhaps be taken out to see the sights of the Island.

In August the following year, Holidays for Heroes Jersey was officially formed and quickly became one of the Island's most popular and successful charities.

By the end of this summer, the charity will have provided 900 holidays for injured servicemen and women and their families, many of whom have had their lives shattered by tragedies in armed conflict.

The former servicemen – always referred to by the couple as 'heroes' – are offered rooms in the Merton Hotel or Maison des Landes in St Ouen, which is specially adapted for disabled guests, and are given free passes to a number of attractions during their week-long stays.

During those years Mrs Woodhouse, the charity's official founder, has been happy to work away quietly in the background while Richard dealt with the newspaper, radio and television interviews. But she was unexpectedly thrown into the media spotlight earlier this month when it was announced that she had been made an MBE for services to injured ser-

vicemen and women in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Former Senator Jean Le Maistre and Shelter Trust manager John Hodge were also made MBEs, while the Bailiff, Michael Birt, was knighted.

The news was officially announced at the Levée at Government House on 15 June as the Woodhouses hosted a record 49 former servicemen and their families. But Mrs Woodhouse had been told privately in that phone call six weeks earlier.

'The phone rang and the person at the other end said, "It's John McColl here". I immediately thought it must be one of the heroes, so I was playing for time trying to remember which one it was and then it suddenly clicked that it was the Lieutenant-Governor.

'I couldn't believe it when he told me. It is still surreal. You don't get told by letter any more, it's all done by phone, and I still have no official paperwork about it.

'It has never crossed my mind once during the last four years that I would get an honour like this.

'You just don't expect to be recognised for doing something that is so rewarding and such fun,' she said.

After the brief call, Mrs Woodhouse returned to her dining room and continued packing the goody bags with her friend.

**Secret**

'It was hard to stay composed but I couldn't say anything. I told Richard as soon as my friend left but I couldn't tell my sons. It all had to be kept quiet,' she said.

For the following six weeks, Mrs Woodhouse had to keep the news a secret and the only record of anything usual happening on 2 May was a mysterious entry in her diary.

'I just wrote "Phone call from H.E.??" The "H.E." stood for "His Excellency" and the two question marks were to throw people off the scent if they read my diary,' she said.

Although delighted with the national recognition, Mrs Woodhouse secretly felt awkward that her husband



Above and right: Dawn and Richard Woodhouse



Left: Ex-servicemen taking the scooters for a spin at Le Braye



Below: The Holidays for Heroes float at the Battle of Flowers



the charity – she was the founder and there can only be one founder.'

Mrs Woodhouse, who worked as a secretary for a number of firms as well as an auxiliary nurse for Family Nursing and Home Care during her working life, still does not know when she will collect the honour or whether it will be the Queen, Prince Charles or Princess Anne who she will be meeting at Buckingham Palace.

And although the honour will be in her name, Mrs Woodhouse is keen to point out that the charity would not have grown into the organisation it is today without the help of Richard and the team of volunteers.

'I would like to dedicate it

to the many hundreds of Islanders who help the charity in so many different ways – often without personal recognition – and in particular Richard, who has supported me from the moment I made the initial decision.

'It has taken over our lives, but then what else would we do with our time? 'The whole team get immense satisfaction from seeing heroes of all ages relax and enjoy the warmth of a Jersey welcome and to witness the military camaraderie between service and ex-service personnel,' said Mrs Woodhouse, who has received more than 100 cards of congratulation from friends as well as those who have benefited directly from the charity she launched.

Richard, who to many people is the public face of the charity, missed out on an honour.

'Charles Woodrow [chief of staff at Government House] phoned about a week after I got the first call. I said to him that I felt awful that it was not going to Richard but he explained the whole process to me and said that it can only go to one person. That put me at ease.

'But it is weird because if Richard had not agreed to

start the charity back when I had the initial idea it would have come to nothing as I would not have done it by myself,' she said.

And Mr Woodhouse agreed that, as the official founder, his wife is well deserving of the honour.

Asked if he was disappointed, he replied: 'Not at all. There is only one founder.'

'Yes, it has always been a two-person job but Dawn was the whole inspiration behind

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