

[DREAM JOB]

Petra Nemcova

Survivor supermodel out to do good, not just look good

By WENDY STRAKER

AFTER getting her start in a local talent search, Petra Nemcova left the Czech Republic at 18 for Milan, and moved on to Paris, London and then New York, where she landed the cover of Sports Illustrated at 22.

One year later she met British photographer Simon Atlee, who became her boyfriend and then her fiancé. It was a fairy-tale life — until everything changed, when the couple was vacationing in Phuket when the tsunami hit in 2004. Nemcova survived, spending eight hours clinging to a palm tree with a broken pelvis and numerous internal injuries, but Atlee was killed.

After months of mourning and rehabilitation, Nemcova returned to modeling — only this time with a purpose, helping children all over the world who suffer from the effects of natural disasters through her organization, the Happy Hearts fund. She's also the new face of Fortunoff, for whom she designed a new jewelry line, whose proceeds benefit the fund.

What made you decide to return to modeling after the tsunami?

It was a difficult decision. The first few jobs were very hard because, for me, modeling had lost its purpose. I wanted to do something that would really help people, especially children, but there I was returning to a job that was somewhat superficial. But then I thought about it and I realized that modeling gives me many opportunities to help people. I get to travel to a lot of countries and meet people and learn about the culture. And I can partner with companies that see the importance in giving back.

What is Happy Hearts?

Happy Hearts focuses on building schools and medical centers for children surviving the effects of natural disasters. Not just physical rebuilding, but also emotional rebuilding, helping these children to cope with the trauma. The best part is when you see the children with smiles back on their faces, with some form of a learning center, food, tools for the future.

And Happy Hearts gets the proceeds from your jewelry collection?

Yes. It's wonderful to be able to merge aspects of my regular job as a model with something meaningful. The first piece I designed is actually inspired by my Happy Hearts logo. It's two hearts connecting, which means infinite love.

Is it true that a talent scout discovered you?

No, I actually went to a talent search when I was a teenager in Czechoslovakia and I won a contest. I started to do a bit of modeling at that point, but then stopped because I was getting bad marks in school and I really wanted to finish school before starting back up again.

People associate modeling with glamour; is it really that glamorous?

Everybody thinks about modeling as endless shopping, fabulous clothes and caviar, but there are days when you wake up at 4 o'clock in the morning and you don't finish until 9 or

SILVER LININGS: Nemcova models the "Happy Hearts" necklace she designed for Fortunoff, sales of which benefit her new charity fund.

10 p.m. It can be hard on your body, and the travel can be very lonely. There are lots of challenges involved: physical, emotional and also mental. Like standing in super-cold water and turning blue. Or doing a photo shoot on the streets of New York in the middle of the winter. Some people treat you very badly in this industry; they treat you as a hanger, especially when you are starting out. So that can be very hard. But you do get very strong because of it. Every job has its pluses and minuses. If I focused on the minuses, I would probably have finished with modeling a long time ago.

What about the plus side?

There are so many pluses — the travel, the people I meet. Modeling is an amazing school of life. You're exposed to so many different cultures, and you learn how to speak languages very fast. It is a very fast life.



N.Y. Post: Jim Alcorn