

The East Kent Mencap interview: Elspeth Penfold, Bolivian/Argentinian textile artist.

Elspeth tells us about working with East Kent Mencap and why creativity is so important.



Tina and Elspeth

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**Elspeth Penfold's work involves weaving, painting, drawing, walking, and writing. Elspeth has been working with East Kent Mencap for the last six years and is passionate about the environment, sustainability, creativity, and learning together.**

**Where does your love for art, in particular weaving, come from?**

I was born in Bolivia and came to the UK as an overseas student. I always felt like I was an outsider, but I found my place with art; it is a very welcoming space.

The culture I work with is Quechua, which is an Andean language, they have a different outlook. They don't have a written language, weaving (especially knots) is used to communicate. Within the Quechua language, there is a recognition that there is no such thing as making a mistake, it is just part of what you have got, and that is the same for people. I often say to the people I work with at East Kent Mencap, everyone brings something.

**How did you first get involved with East Kent Mencap?**

I heard about East Kent Mencap via the Garden Gate project in Margate about six years ago. My first project was with GOLD (Getting on with learning difficulties) as part of an event organised by the Well Projects, with five other artists.

I have been very fortunate to get quite a lot of funded projects over the last few years. East Kent Mencap brings something very unique to the projects, it is not just my work, it is everyone's work, and the members deserve a huge amount of recognition. It isn't about me delivering workshops, it is about all learning together. People with a learning disability open your eyes to other ways of thinking and doing things.

**Can you describe a standout project that you have created with East Kent Mencap?**

There are many, but the 'Intertidal Calligraphy' project, in association with the Museum of London Archaeology, was just great. Working together with the East Kent Mencap members, we wrote poems

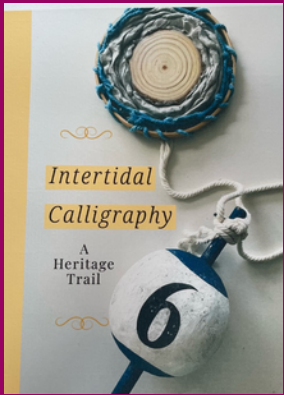
without words and published them as a book. I took it to the Latin American Book Fair and three copies are now available at the Poetry Library at the South Bank, London.

**What do you enjoy most about working with East Kent Mencap?**

I feel very humble. Knowing that the families of people with a learning disability have somewhere safe to go to is so important, we don't understand half of what they (the families) go through. People who use East Kent Mencap services are so happy, but if someone is having an off day the staff are very kind and supportive.

**What is your next project with East Kent Mencap?**

We are about to embark on a Shared Reading Project, with the support of The Margate Bookie. The idea is to share and read aloud poems, talk about how they make you feel, and ask questions, if you want to. I worked with Owen Lowery, formerly a British Judo



“The Intertidal Calligraphy project was just great.”



Lucy and Elspeth

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Champion, who through injury became a tetraplegic. Sadly, he has passed away but generously left me with ten recordings of his remarkable poems. I plan to use his poems as part of this project and I think he would be very happy to know they are being shared in this way.

**What type of material and equipment do you use in your work?**

I have a rope machine. I must say it is quite performative! Someone once said to me it is a sculpture itself. It allows you to thread and explain storytelling, by weaving things together to create a narrative.

The materials I tend to use are things I find. I am into sustainability and use things that are given to me. I like making community projects with resources from that place.

I am very passionate about celebrating individuality. We separate things up as it is easy to analyse scientifically, however, in Quechua nothing exists in isolation.

**What would you say to someone thinking about getting involved with the charity?**

I would say definitely do it. It is the most rewarding thing to be part of a community-minded organisation that does so much, in so many different places. I would also say once you start, you won't stop!

**This year we are celebrating East Kent Mencap's 75th anniversary. What would you like for the charity in the years ahead?**

I would like more recognition for the work East Kent Mencap does. They also need more funding support to expand their great work. Creativity gives you well-being, to be able to offer more of that within communities would be great.

Find out more about Elspeth's work at [www.elspeth-billie-penfold.com](http://www.elspeth-billie-penfold.com)

**If you have a story to share about your experience with East Kent Mencap, please do get in touch at [funds@eastkentmencap.co.uk](mailto:funds@eastkentmencap.co.uk).**



Gathering of Flowers workshop with GOLD



Silk maps made by East Kent Mencap members