

# Dresses for success

*Travellers needed  
to bring dress packages  
to Cuba, Dominican Republic*

BY KAREN MCKINLEY  
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A Thunder Bay businesswoman is asking anyone who is going to Cuba or the Dominican Republic for vacation to leave some room for a clothing package in their luggage.

Erika Maki, owner of A Spa For You, wants people to take a few dresses with them as part of a Soroptomist International initiative called Business in a Bag to help women earn more income. The dresses are needed to help women start their own rental and bridal shops.

Maki said she has plenty of dresses, but needs help getting them to their final destinations.

"Right now, our concern is sending the dresses," she said in an interview on Saturday. "The community has been extremely supportive, but it's hard to send one dress at a time. What we are doing right now is looking at more bulk sending and other avenues."

Helpers can tell Maki where they are going and she will give them a package and the address of a nearby hotel where they can drop it off. Once at their destination, a helper leaves the package with a contact or at a specific location. Maki said this helps cut costs for the women as many can't afford long taxi rides to airports.

Soroptomist International is trying to make the initiative more national. Maki said Thunder Bay has three direct flights to Cuba daily, but they are trying to get some of the larger centres involved. The focus is on Cuba and the Dominican Republic right now because that's where the direct flights from Thunder Bay are headed. They also had a Confederation College student

bring dresses to Chile during an exchange project.

The packages contain everything a woman needs to start a rental business. Maki explained formal gowns are in big demand for weddings and quinceanera, a girl's 15th birthday, which is considered the turning point from childhood to adulthood in Spanish-influenced cultures. A formal dress is expensive, if they are even available in

the country. Helping to start rental businesses makes gently used formal dresses available to communities for celebrations and helps women earn much-needed extra income.

"In places like Cuba, most people earn only \$20 a month," Maki said. "If these

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**Erika Maki**

*A Spa For You*

women can rent a dress for \$20 to \$50 a day, that could be up to an extra \$10,000 in their pocket. It's a big boost for them and their families in a place where toothpaste could cost a dollar, or a taxi ride could be \$5."

In recent years, the Cuban government has allowed more private-for-profit businesses. Maki said they have been sending packages to Cuba and other countries for years and volunteers have not had any problems with customs.

"In Cuba especially, we are within the legal parameters because the dresses are used, not new and it's not illegal to bring used clothes into a country," she said. "We've been sending bags there for years and no one has ever been stopped."

The Business in a Bag project is not limited to dresses and makeup. Maki said they take almost anything a person can use to start a business, from photography equipment, to some electronics and household appliances.

To find out more, contact Maki at 475-6977.



THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL/KAREN MCKINLEY

Erika Maki shows some wedding dresses that need to be taken to Cuba as part of a Soroptomist International project to help women in the island nation start their own business. She is asking anyone who is going there for a vacation to take a dress to drop off at certain locations.