

New life for fancy dresses

Shops in Cuba can use wedding, bridesmaid gowns

BY SARAH ELIZABETH BROWN
THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

They're everywhere. Stuffed in boxes, crammed in the back of spare-room closets or in hidden away in attics.

But those bridal gowns and bridesmaid dresses can live again, and help Cuban women become self-sufficient business owners in the process.

Erika Maki, an esthetician who owns a Thunder Bay spa, has been collecting those fancy gowns for four years and shipping them to Cuba.

The mother of a Cuban woman she became friends with is using the gowns in a dress rental shop.

The 50-something mother and seamstress has become so successful, she's been able to support her daughter and extended family, Maki said.

Between 30 and 50 Thunder Bay dresses have made their way to Cuba.

One woman who married 30 years ago donated her dress, and among the more recent dresses is one that belonged to CBC Radio host Mary-Jean Cormier, who married last year.

Maki's own wedding dress was cut up and dyed not long after she married 14 years ago, but she's pitched in five bridesmaid's dresses, including a lovely pink number that cost \$350 — and is something she wouldn't ever wear again.

BUSINESS

Wedding gowns open doors for Cuban women

Off to Cuba it went, along with the veil and train from her wedding gown ensemble.

Now, Maki wants to help another Cuban woman become a frock entrepreneur.

She's looking for a batch of 10 dresses to create a "business in a bag."

"Even in poor countries, brides want to look beautiful," said Maki.

In a country where the average monthly wage is \$10 to \$15, wedding dress rentals can range from \$20 to \$100, allowing the business owner to become self-sufficient.

As well as weddings, the dresses are rented out for Cuban girls' 15th "coming of age" birthdays, a lavish event for those young women.

Others can be cut down and stitched into baptismal or communion dresses.

Maki's connection with Cuba started in 1999 when she and her husband began sending suitcases of household items to a family they'd met there.

Once she had a baby and stopped working for a while, she looked for a new way to help.

She'd been toying with different things she could send that Cubans could use to create their own businesses when she learned another Thunder Bay traveler took a wedding dress to give away.

Thinking that was a great idea, she asked her spa clients for dresses and sent the occasional public service announcement to media outlets.

"People telling people," she said of the best advertising her project has.

Soroptimist International, a worldwide service orga-



BRENT LINTON/THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

Erika Maki is seen with a wedding dress that will be delivered to Cuba.

nization of professional women, has since come on board.

Since dresses travel to Cuba with willing Thunder

Bay tourists, the project costs next to nothing to run.

Anyone wishing to donate a dress can contact Maki at 939-1546 or 475-6977.