

★ women who **make a difference** wedding angels



Millie Harris plays fairy godmother by giving brides luxury gowns for free!

dream dresses for military brides

By Stephanie Stephens

Renée Morgan cried tears of joy when Millie Harris, owner of The Collection Bridal in Winter Park, Florida, called to tell her the good news. Renée could have the wedding gown of her dreams—worth \$1,400—for free.

"My marriage will be blessed because I've gotten this gift," exclaims Renée, 21, as she reflects on her recent April wedding to Army

diver Joshua Hawkins, 23, of Nixa, Missouri. "There's no way I could have afforded a dress like this," she confides. "Finances have been really tight." Renée was living near Josh in Newport News, Virginia, last spring when her mom, Teresa, and sister Natalie read something almost too good to be true in the local newspaper. Millie's store would be giving away dresses to military brides

as a way for her to thank the troops. The two eager family members—the same dress size as Renée—tried on the gowns in Millie's elegant shop as Renée hung on to their every descriptive word via a lengthy long-distance call. "They picked out the perfect dress," Renée says of the diamond white organza gown by Eve of Milady.

Josh left active service on January 10, 2005, after working the front line dive team in Iraq doing risky river reconnaissance, checking for and dismantling bombs. He is now in school and planning a career in wildlife or physics. Renée is an assistant manager at an apartment complex.

Meeting Millie was a miracle, says Renée, who was one of 45 women to be given a gown that day from top-notch designers including Vera Wang. Millie purposely held the event on May 15, 2004, which was Armed Forces Day. She and her eager staff meticulously attended to fittings for hours, keeping the store open late.

"We wanted these brides to experience trying on gowns like other brides," says Millie. The day's total donation was worth \$90,000, but the feeling it gave Millie was priceless.

The giveaway concept was hatched last spring

when Millie and her friend Donna Pickett, of the store Brides by Donna in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, attended a retail bridal show in New York. Store owners discussed America's war effort and noted that many weddings were postponed as soldiers were deployed overseas. Some were engaged women; others, male troops leaving behind their worried fiancées. Duty pay is not extravagant, yet wedding costs can be—the gown may be the most expensive article of clothing a woman ever buys—and so the friends formed the idea of donating dresses to those in need. It soon spread, and ultimately a number of bridal shops jumped on the bandwagon nationwide.

Millie's and Donna's giveaway criteria were simple: Brides needed only to present proof of their or

Right: A dress from Donna lets Kathy Ohlinger, with husband Richard, have a dream wedding. **Below:** Marc and Shana Arnold, in a dress from Donna, married New Year's Eve.



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their fiancé's deployment. Both women created a special section of dresses in their stores and let brides try on and select whichever of those gowns they fancied.

Donna Pickett gave away beautiful frocks worth more than \$54,000 to 14 brides on Memorial Day. Her enthusiastic employees pampered the brides-to-be with Brie, lemonade and chocolate-covered strawberries. A stranger wrote her after attending the wedding of one gown recipient: "I am deeply moved by your contribution to young brides of our American servicemen. Your gracious generosity has touched the hearts of many. You're an angel in disguise."

One remarkable bride is 54-year-old Kathy Ohlinger of Akron, Ohio,

a breast cancer survivor who was married for the first time in the hospital in October 2003 in her pajamas. Her husband, Richard Dewey, 52, is a full-time sergeant in the Army National Guard. Kathy was older than most, notes Donna, "but her application letter was so wonderful. It was her dream to have a real gown and be married in a ceremony instead of in the hospital." With her mammograms O.K., Kathy realized her dream wedding last fall, with Donna in attendance as she and Richard reaffirmed their personal vows "for real."

"It was a gorgeous dress," Kathy exclaims of the antique-white, Victorian-inspired gown by noted designer Richard Glasgow. "Everybody raved about it." Kathy's

husband picked it out, and she nearly fainted when she learned of the \$5,000 price tag.

"Donna gave me not only the true feeling of what a wedding should be, but a confidence in myself and my femininity that a lot of women lose track of after fighting breast cancer," she says, vowing to pay Donna's kindness forward by sharing her dress with another military bride or cancer survivor.

Millie and Donna have decided to repeat their gown giveaways this July. "It did us more good than the brides," says Millie with a laugh. She looks forward to the next event. Donna adds, "We all feel this war personally, and you hope to bring a little sunshine to what has to be a really stressful situation. What we did is not much, but it's something."