

Style Plus

Bride & Joy: Guiding Mom Down the Aisle

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Was the perfect wedding dress out there? Could it be altered in time? My mom and I were giggling, giddy and anxious as we discreetly ducked into the bridal salon. A good-natured saleswoman asked me if I'd already chosen a gown. She asked my mom what kind of mother-of-the-bride dress she had in mind.

"I'm the bride," my mother leaned in and whispered, an unfamiliar teenage excitement in her voice. The young woman offered a confused, apologetic smile and directed us to the gowns.

Shoulder to shoulder with other mother-daughter pairs, we began searching through the racks of white chiffon, lace and silk. As my mom pulled dresses off the hangers and held them against herself, I realized that even the most experienced brides now find it hard to resist the tempting wedding marketing machine. My mom, who had raised me on her ultrafeminist, intellectual, liberal values, had been consulting me about colors, corsages and caterers since the day of her engagement. The questions were bewildering considering that my parents set an entirely different example back in 1967, when they eloped. They put the dog in the convertible in Berkeley, drove to Reno and exchanged vows in the most private of ceremonies. Only the dog and a nearby vagrant bore witness.

As my mom closed the dressing room curtain, I took my place on the couch, sandwiched between mothers of brides. We all watched dutifully as the brides emerged from the fitting rooms and pirouetted gowns before us. I pondered the existence of a "daughter of the bride" dress section. Might "daughters of the bride" become so common that they eclipse the role of "mother of the bride"?

The bridal salons don't have explicit daughter-of-the-bride sections, yet. But there ought to be plenty of demand. According to a wedding Web site the Knot, the U.S. wedding industry generates about \$70 billion in retail sales every year. Tap the couple's children, and watch sales multiply. I shopped for months trying to find an "appropriate" dress for the wedding. And without any "daughter of the bride" protocol pamphlet to reference, I ended up buying five dresses hoping one might work.

Bride Again magazine says that 43 percent of marriages are a remarriage for either the bride or the groom. Pamela Hill Nettleton, author of "Getting Married When It's Not Your First Time: An Etiquette Guide and Wedding Planner," also notes that "many people are getting married for the first time at a later stage in their lives." But while I, like much of the younger generation, may be postponing tying the knot, it doesn't mean I'm inexperienced when it comes to weddings. At age 29, I've walked down the aisle a half-dozen times. I am a highly experienced

bridesmaid.

But all that experience did not prepare me for the conundrum I would face in yet another San Francisco bridal boutique. My mother the bride finally found a raw silk gown with a corseted top. It was sophisticated and elegant. It was also light pink. The pastel shade was more appropriate for a senior prom than a senior wedding. But my mom had been acting like a schoolgirl in love since she met Marvin, and the color didn't seem wholly inappropriate. When she looked to me (dressed head to toe in New York black) for advice, I counseled her to take time and get whatever color she wanted. Etiquette expert Elizabeth Post would probably agree. In her book "Emily Post on Second Weddings," Post gives today's second-time bride the go-ahead to wear white: "White is now considered symbolic of joy rather than virginity." My mom decided on ivory, but it had nothing to do with proper etiquette. "You might want to wear this when you get married," she said. I balked. "Try on the dress," she insisted. Within minutes I found myself staring into the mirror in a long bridal gown, utterly perplexed. Even though she was the bride, I was still the daughter.

One of the nice things about navigating the uncharted protocol of the "daughter of the bride" is liberty in choosing responsibilities. I graciously helped plan the ceremony and choose music. I signed off on invitation designs. The day before the wedding, my mom began to hyperventi-

late. I reassured her there was nothing to worry about. These were normal pre-wedding jitters. I had seen this before. Everything would be just fine. I made a salad and encouraged her to eat to help calm her nerves. I advised her on jewelry and accessories. I sat her down and showed her how to apply makeup.

The day of the wedding she was so nervous, she could barely hold a conversation. While driving her to the ceremony site, I tried to distract her with stories of my colorful dating life in Manhattan. We laughed about the arrogant bankers, neurotic doctors and tortured artists I had met. We marveled at how she and her husband-to-be, both widowed, and both approaching their sixth decade, fell in love.

Finally, after months of preparation, the moment came. It was late on a cool California afternoon. The guests, many with white hair, peered over their glasses and waited eagerly in the garden to witness the celebration of this new beginning. The string quartet began. My brothers, my stepsister-to-be and I, all single and of marrying age, assembled to walk our parents down the aisle. First, Amanda walked the groom, her father. He, in his tuxedo, moved with the confidence of experience. She, wearing her mother's dress, fell in step with her father. Then I, in a floral print cocktail dress, linked arms with my younger brother and followed their path. At last, my mother appeared. My older brother guided her steadily toward the *chuppah*, the Jewish wedding



FAMILY PHOTO

Francesca Segré adjusts her mother's necklace on the latter's wedding day.

canopy. She was radiant and youthful, but walked with the certainty of a mother. The rabbi began speaking, and my brothers and I looked at each other. We silently, simultaneously, wished our mother a happy future full of love and fulfillment. A fleeting tinge of parental concern swept over, and suddenly it was done. We had married her off.