

# *In Her Hands: All the Dreams And Dresses Of the Big Day*

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THE expression "Every bride is beautiful" is more than just a sentiment for Lydia Colombo of Stratford. It describes her life's work as a couture dressmaker, having personally been responsible for creating hundreds of beautiful brides for more than 25 years.

As the month of June winds down, Mrs. Colombo, 58, can begin to catch her breath. During the spring and fall, her busiest sewing months, her workday often begins at 7 in the morning and doesn't end until 2 the next morning. Fortunately, she doesn't have much of a commute.

Mrs. Colombo, who averages 12 to 15 wedding gowns from scratch a year, does her work in a 9-by-12-foot sun-filled sewing room in her home. It is here that the designer meets her clients and listens to their wedding-day dreams. It is here that she takes a first measurement, discusses her fees (from \$1,500 to \$5,000, including materials) and sets up a schedule to make the dress.

"Although it actually takes about two months from beginning to end," Mrs. Colombo said, "I do like to see a bride one year in advance of the wedding date to put her on my schedule. I'm proud to say that I've never missed a deadline throughout all these years."

Deciding on the dress style and headpiece, selecting fabrics, purchasing shoes, doing fittings, allowing for size fluctuations and finishing touches are part of the time frame.

"I sometimes go to bridal shops with them and they show me the gowns they're interested in so I can see them firsthand," Mrs. Colombo said. "I'm introduced as their aunt or cousin, but I'm really there to copy the styles. Often, they want custom-made gowns because they want different fabrics or colors and so we work together to create their dream dress."

Mrs. Colombo first began sewing when she was a young girl in Siracusa, Italy. "My father was old-fashioned and believed that a woman's place was in the home, to cook and clean and care for the family," Mrs. Colombo said. "When I was 13 years old, he bought me a Necchi sewing machine so I could learn to prepare the trousseau linens for my eventual marriage."

First practicing on doll clothing, the young Lydia later perfected the art of embroidery and monogramming, working on exquisite Italian linens. As a teenager, she learned tailoring techniques from a local shopkeeper and eventually, she was making suits for her father and three brothers.

At 23, leaving her family, a fiance, and her culture behind, she came to the United States on a 28-day visitors' visa to see the 1965 World's Fair in New York.

She quickly settled into life in the United States, living with an aunt and her family in New York City. She changed her visa to student status and attended the Spanish American Institute, where she soon mastered the English language. She took a job at a small dressmaking shop, which prepared apparel for many top fashion designers, on Madison Avenue in Manhattan.

"Through this experience, I met a lot of beautiful people," Mrs. Colombo said. "The designers would show us their sketches, bring the fabrics and we would make the garments."

Mrs. Colombo said she worked for, among others, Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue and Elizabeth Arden Boutique and for the designers Donald and Brooks and Halston. She also said she worked on the evening gowns of clients like Jacqueline Kennedy, Happy Rockefeller and the Shah of Iran's first wife, Queen Soraya.

It wasn't long before she began planning her own wedding dress.

The seamstress met her future husband, Michael Colombo, when she was 29; they married and moved to Connecticut and eventually had a son, Michael and a daughter, Lucy. As word of the Stratford dressmaker-turned-homemaker, spread through the circles of family and friends, Mrs. Colombo started taking on private clients.

"Mostly, these were people who would see pictures of couture designs in the magazines and newspapers and would want me to duplicate the styles," she said. "I did everything from alterations to suits to evening dresses."

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At some point, the dressmaker decided that the work she enjoyed most was making wedding gowns and the dresses associated with the bridal party including the bridesmaids and the mothers of the bride and groom. She printed business cards and set herself up as a specialist in wedding attire. She has been busy ever since.

Eva Poplaski, the owner of the Classic Brides bridal store in Stratford, said Mrs. Colombo is the best dressmaker in the area for one reason: "She's a perfectionist."

In her work space at home, a six-foot table is used to display, inspect and cut the elegant, delicate fabrics she uses. A typical wedding gown has 10 to 12 yards of fabric, depending on the length of the train.

Above the table, like wallpaper, a collage of bridal magazine fashion photos, formal sketches and designs referred to for duplication, inspiration or appreciation. There are also pictures of and thank-you notes from grateful brides.

Mrs. Colombo builds a quick bond with her brides. Part of the process involves taking a trip into New York's fabric district together. Mrs. Colombo's long-standing relationship with New York fabric shop owners gives her brides a distinct advantage.

"She's a professional," said Frank Sena, owner of the Sposabella Lace Company in Manhattan. "On every occasion, before she even walks into our store, she's done her homework."

"Her work is on par with the couture industry -- truly expert and professional with impeccable finishing."

In purchasing fabrics from the same sources that national and international designers use, her clients' gowns will be composed of couture quality materials imported from Italy, France and England.

"I work with all types of fabric, whatever the design dictates: silk shantung, organza, pure silk peau de soie, chantilly lace or ornate beading."

Recently, Amy Lichtenberger, 27, accompanied the dressmaker on a search for the perfect fabric for her wedding dress. "At first, I was nervous about having the gown made but I felt much more confident with the process when Lydia took me to New York and showed me her world. It was an incredible experience."

Besides making dresses from scratch, working on heirloom gowns is also a particular favorite of Mrs. Colombo's.

"I'm a family-oriented person myself so I love it when a bride wants to restore a mother's or grandmother's gown. There is an extra layer of sentimental value in the continuity of an heirloom."

She recalled one bride who longed to wear her mother's gown.

"She came to me and told me that she wanted to wear her mother's dress but realized that she was larger in size than the mother was," Mrs. Colombo said. "I actually didn't have her try on the dress. I just took her measurements and told her to leave the gown with me."

The dress was 26 years old and made entirely of Italian lace.

"I told her I would do the best I could. After she left, I picked up the gown, studied the style and took note of the satin sash being used as an accent. I bought more satin and used it to add gussets, or extra widths, to each side," Mrs. Colombo said.

The designer remembers the bride's expression when she came back to try it on. "She hugged me and cried and I said 'Why are you crying?' and she said, 'I never thought I could wear it.' It turned out that the girl's mother had died in a car accident a few years back and it touched my heart."

Mrs. Colombo hopes some day to make a dress for Lucy, 24. "I look forward to making my daughter's wedding gown when the time comes. We'll pick some exquisite fabrics and I know it will be special."

Although each design has its own set of challenges, the finished gown is always meticulously personalized.

"This is one of the most important days of a woman's life and I think she should spend that day being as happy and as comfortable as she possibly can. Seeing those girls smiling in those beautiful gowns is more important than any payment I could receive for the job."