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The Lost Art of Sewing

By Moya Stone



From left: Kathy Wharton, Allison Wharton, Audrey Wharton, and Savannah Flowers.

Photo Andy Scheck

It seems that nobody knows how to sew these days. Sewing went out of favor in the 1970s with the influx of inexpensive mass-produced clothing and the influence of the feminist movement, which claimed women had bigger things to do. But for Lafayette native Kathy Wharton, sewing is a pretty big thing; it's a business and it's a family tradition.

As a child in the 1960s Wharton learned to sew from her mother and grandmother, who like most housewives at the time were accomplished seamstresses making clothing for themselves and their families.

Wharton is now pleased to pass along what she knows to three of her granddaughters. "Sewing is very rewarding," she says, "if you can hang in there long enough to get over the early frustration of figuring out the ins and outs of it all." Savannah Flowers, 7, from Walnut Creek thinks she's up for it. She has made clothes for her dolls and now wants to make clothing for herself. "It's fun and

you can make up your own designs," she says. Visiting from San Diego, Audrey Wharton, 10, and Allison Wharton, 8, also have made doll clothes and are now ready for bigger challenges. Audrey says she's excited about going back to school in the fall sporting a skirt she made herself.

Wharton had the same experience at Audrey's age. "Just to be able to do your own mending and hemming is helpful," she says, "but to be able to make your own clothing is fun." Wharton started off making doll clothes, too, and by the time she was 9 years old she completed her first dress. "It was a Girl Scout project and we took a class at Capwell's in Walnut Creek," explains Wharton. "I made a pink and white sleeveless full-skirt dress with buttons down the front and a collar."

However, sewing didn't always go smoothly for Wharton. "I was a real mess when I first started," she admits with a chuckle. "If it didn't fit I wanted to throw it away." One such disappointment was a royal blue wool A-line skirt. At 12, Wharton was impatient and sewed the skirt without taking time to measure the pattern. It didn't fit and she tossed it in the trash. But Wharton's mother would have none of that, telling her that she wouldn't buy any more fabric if Wharton didn't dig that piece out and try again. So she did and learned that she needed to slow down. "That was hard for me," she says. Still, Wharton persevered because she enjoyed the sense of accomplishment.

After that, Wharton continued to sew as did most girls her age, signing up for all the home economics classes she could at Del Valle High School in Walnut Creek. Wharton says it took three or four years of classes and projects to hone her skills but by the time she graduated from high school she was able to make her entire wardrobe for college, which included three blouses, two skirts, a dress, and a jacket. "That was a turning point for me," says Wharton. "I knew then that I could do this and do it right."

Wharton went on to get her degree in child development from UC Davis. Later while she and her husband were living in Memphis, Tenn., she opened a sewing business, which she named Kathleen Amanda: Dressmaking, Alterations, Home Décor.

"A friend of mine asked me to make some school clothes for her kids," Wharton explains. Soon, friends of friends were placing orders and Kathleen Amanda was officially a business. It was a

good situation for Wharton, as sewing allowed her to stay at home with her three sons.

Most of her customers were women who, living a more formal Southern lifestyle, wanted detailed and dressy pieces, which Wharton enjoyed making. She says that's when she was able to practice her skills in detail work such as pin tucks, pleating and her favorite, smocking.

After moving back to Lafayette in 1990 with her family, Wharton set up shop again. She does everything including alterations, wedding and prom dresses, slacks, blouses and skirts, and home décor items such as pillows and cushions. She is able to work with patterns or without. Often she is asked to create something from just a magazine photo or to recreate a favorite but worn-to-shreds piece.

It's these rare skills that Wharton's granddaughters have the opportunity to learn over time. She plans to start them on a pillowcase and then a simple elastic-band skirt. "As a grandmother, it is great quality time spent with my eager granddaughters."

For more information on Kathy Wharton's sewing services e-mail kfwharton@yahoo.com or call (925) 283-2153.

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