

CHARITY: Creating good karma as you walk down the aisle

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When Naomi Szeben was planning her wedding, she made giving back a part of her special day instead of making it the typical "all about me" day.

She did this, in part, by purchasing a dress from The Brides' Project, a shop in Toronto that sells donated bridal gowns and dresses with all the profits going to various cancer charities.

Szeben got the idea to buy a dress for a good cause by a friend in the U.S. who had purchased her dress at a charity auction and decided to look for a similar place in Toronto. A lucky Google hit led her not only to the perfect dress, but also to supporting a great cause.

"I could feel comfortable putting the money towards a charity and felt better spending money going towards something fabulous," she said.

Helen Sweet founded The Brides' Project in 2004 by putting two things together that traditionally are at the opposite ends of happiness: cancer and weddings.

Sweet has experienced both. She has suffered loss from cancer throughout her life, beginning with her childhood best friend who died from leukemia, and most recently, her grandmother who passed away from breast cancer.

She has also been married twice, the last time in 2004. With a modest budget of \$5,000, Sweet said she couldn't help but think that if someone had just given her that money she would have donated to charity, not spend it on wedding stuff.

"I felt so wasteful and guilty about the fact that I was accumulating this room of crap including centrepieces, bombonieres...and quite frankly, I couldn't live with it," she said.

She also didn't like that she was only wearing her dress once, and found a way to share it with someone else.



CHARITY: Creating good karma as you walk down the aisle. Elyse Frost, left, Jennifer Aquiling and Shawna Dwyer model wedding gowns at The Brides' Project - a program that re-sells unused, donated wedding dresses at wholesale prices. All proceeds from sales at The Brides' Project benefits various cancer charities. *Staff photo/NICK PERRY*

"It ended up being given to a 14 year old who was (in) remission for leukemia as her dress up dress so that she could feel special," Sweet said.

After being featured on a local news program when she only had three dresses, The Brides' Project officially took off. From those modest beginnings, today Sweet and her invaluable group of volunteers have sold hundreds of dresses.

Eighty-five per cent of the dresses Sweet sells are new and donated by salons, mostly from the Toronto area, that otherwise would have discarded to make room for newer stock. The remainders are donated from individuals across Canada.

At any given time they carry big labels like Vera Wang to popular Toronto designers like Justina McCaffrey, with prices ranging from \$600 to \$1,250. All the profits go to supporting people and their families affected by cancer.

"Camp Quality is the one we send the most cash donations to," Sweet said. "We also support other events done by organizations like The Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation or if we have a client who wants to do the Run for the Cure we'll support them," she said.

Buying from The Brides' Project doesn't just support good causes, but it's also an environmentally friendly option. Sweet said she has had people come from all over North America to buy a dress, some of whom want to save money, some who champion her cause and others, like Szeben, who consider the environment on their wedding day.

Szeben said the usual mentality towards weddings is "anything goes," but just having graduated university at the time of her wedding from the Environmental and Information Studies program at University of Toronto no less, money was tight and being wasteful wasn't an option.

"Going for the whole-hog, wasteful experience was not for us," she said. "We've attended too many weddings where everything was tossed out afterwards, and we thought, 'how does that constitute fun or traditional?'"

Everything about their August 2008 wedding was green and following the 100-mile rule. This included invitations, food, flowers and bridal party gifts.

"My husband Dom and I always asked ourselves, 'how will this be used or discarded?' throughout the planning process," Szeben said. "If it would eventually wind up in the trash, it was not an option on our list, if it could be recycled or composted, it was in."

And her dress, which she purchased for \$300, was not only green, but it was also a beautiful and she loved it.

"The dress was in fashion, elegant and not something that was found in the back of grandma's closet," Szeben said.

Sweet became an officiant in the fall of 2006, and that along with making her own veils has been a way for her to make extra money. She also has many industry associates, like photographers and florists, who she can refer her brides to making The Brides' Project potentially one-stop shopping while further supporting local charities.

"I tell them, 'If I send you brides to get their flowers from there, are you willing to donate a percentage of those sales to the charity of your choice?' so it keeps on going," Sweet said.

This year marked The Brides' Project first time going to The National Bridal Show in Toronto, where Sweet said her main goal was to raise awareness about the importance of being socially and ecologically

conscious.

"It's letting people know what we're all about and all of the above in terms of the consciousness, socially, environmentally and financially," Sweet said. "There are so many things about a wedding that can be recycled, gently used items from the dress to the decor items."

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