

## Conversation with a dream weaver

Marie Gray surprised herself and wowed her fiancé 36 years ago when she picked up a couple of knitting needles and some cream-colored yarn, and wove a simple, sleeveless mock-turtleneck tube dress, very *de rigueur* in 1962. Thus, the professional model and *Queen for a Day* contestants invented the original St. John knit ensemble, a creation that evolved into a fashion empire.

"I made it all up as I went along," says Gray. "My knitting experience was limited to half of one sock and a failed attempt at a sweater."

But love conquers all, and Gray was determined to impress her future husband and eventual St. John CEO Robert Gray. "I wanted him to realize that I was not just a fashion model who spent every penny on designer clothes."

The dress became Gray's trademark, combining the fashion elements she prized today: timeless, elegant, classic designs that fit flawlessly.

After tying the proverbial knot, Bob Gray encouraged Marie to set up shop in the living room of their home, where she created several additional

designs on a huge loom, including what would become her signature suit.

Potential buyers were contacted, they placed orders, and a label was launched.

Rather than unravel at the seams, the Grays bought two more looms and moved their business into the garage. Soon, a presidential hopeful was born. Their daughter, Kelly, was soon fed the business, and in 1996 the innovative designer, model and business leader took her rightful place at the helm of the company.

"She completely understands the ins and outs of the business," says her mother. "In some ways, she's much more talented than her mom and dad. But we all get feedback from one another. Kelly helps retail, merchandising and advertising and keeps us on track in the design area. Bob tracks sales and oversees all of the financial end of the business, and I'm involved in all of the design aspects."

The trio's design aesthetic makes converts of practically every woman who tries a St. John on for size, including First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. The one-loom cottage industry

has become a multimillion-dollar conglomerate thanks to the entrepreneurial savvy of its founders, as well as the flexibility of its product.

Says Marie Gray, "The clothes fit precisely and flatter the wearer. They're soft, comfortable, elegant, feminine and the colors are gorgeous."

In town on Nov. 12 for a Neiman Marcus and Lovelight Foundation fashion show and luncheon, Gray presented her 1999 Cruise Collection. Highlights included simple sheath dresses paired with long cardigans or short jackets; ethnic-inspired tunics and short bronze skirts; classic evening suits; and glamorous gowns embellished with crystals and embroidery. The color palette ranged from earth tones to bright shades of azalea and blue tourmaline.

As is the nature of the fashion biz, Gray was already spinning yarns about Fall/Winter 1999. "I brought my sketchbook with me," she said as she panned drawings in her Townsend hotel room. Next spring was quickly becoming a fond memory.

-Linda Bachruck



St. John style: Above: Rainbow sherry 2-piece suit, \$1,280. Left: Kenya tunic, \$750 and bronze skirt, \$250. From the St. John 1999 Cruise Collection at Neiman Marcus, Somerset Collection, Troy.

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## Where can I find?

This feature is dedicated to helping readers locate sources for hard-to-find merchandise. If you've seen any of the items in your retail travels or basements, please call Where Can I Find? (248) 901-2655. Supply and clearly tell your name, number and message, and you should see your item in a few weeks. Due to the overwhelming response to this column, we only publish the requested item two or three times. If you have not seen a response or heard from us, we were unable to locate the item. Thank you.

### WHAT WE FOUND:

Whale Hall products can be found through White Hall products in Monroe, Mich., or on the Web at www.WhaleHallProducts.com.

An adult point-by-number set can be found in the Spilburgh Company catalog 1-800-772-1760, 3650 Milwaukee Street, P.O. Box 8922, Madison, Wis. 53708-8922. They have three different ones at \$37.95. Also in the back of the current issue of *Woman's Day* magazine is a mail order for Paint-By-Numbers.

Linda has a 7-foot Mountain King artificial Christmas tree; she would like to donate to a charitable organization. She will deliver it.

Back issues of Martha Stewart's Wedding magazine can be ordered at 1-800-950-7130 for \$5.50 or on the Web at www.MarthaMail.com/summer wedding.

### RETAIL GIANTS

Lewin Beauty Supply in Oak Park and West Bloomfield carried Unisensitized perfume, as does the Beauty Boutique catalog (440) 826-2008.

The Catholic Baltimore catechism can be ordered through the Mother of Our Savior Co., Inc. catalog 1-800-451-1393.

Found the game "Stock Market" for Kathy.

Zen Shiseido perfume was seen at Hudson's Fairlane and Arpege Dusting Powder at Neiman Marcus at the Somerset Collection in Troy.

The J.C. Penney Fall/Winter catalog on page 1074 has light-colored bathroom carpeting, color Tiger Lily.

The Hallmark Wayne Gretzky ornament can be found at Gibraltor Trade Center.

### WE'RE STILL LOOKING FOR:

Peggy wants soft Mini-Miniconka moccasins at discount prices.

Christina is looking for the plastic transmission bearing #24591-5 for her Oster Kitchen Center, Service #97208FF; the part is obsolete.

Judy is looking for Lilly white flour and cornmeal other than the one sold at Danner's.

Walt is looking for a 1950 Big Beaver High School yearbook.

There are a number of people who still want hanging laundry bags, Chatty Cathy dolls, Santa Bears, Christian Dior's Diorissimo.

### RETAIL DETAILS

#### POLAR EXPRESS MAIL

Beginning Friday, Nov. 27, kids can write and send their letters to Santa through the Magic Mailbox at The North Pole Connection in Summit Place mall. All letters are guaranteed a response from Santa. Also hear up-to-the-minute news from Mrs. Claus and other North Pole residents. This interactive holiday center is located in the Hudson's wing, Summit Place, Telegraph and Elizabeth Lake Road, Waterford.

At a special awards presentation and luncheon at the DIA on Nov. 16, the Michigan Retailers Association and *The Detroit News* honored three local retailers of Michigan's Retailers of the Year. The winners, divided into small-, medium- and large-volume categories, are South Lyon Cycle in South Lyon, Jules R. Schubel Jewellers in Troy and Hudson's in Southfield.

#### ZOO-TO-DO

The Mosaic Youth Theatre will premiere a trilogy of short plays titled "AM-TV: All Amphibians.

All the Time," at the Detroit Zoo's Wildlife Interpretive Gallery on Nov. 28-29. The free, 30-minute performances coincide with zoo's hosting of the Smithsonian traveling exhibition, "Vanishing Amphibians." 12:30 and 2:30 p.m.

#### FAREWELL

Christopher Gerard Jewellers, voted Best Jeweler of the Year in 1996, is closing its doors. Designers of the Red Wings Stanley Cup rings, the store has been in business at 28001 Southfield Road for many years.

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