

# Mom adds new meaning to 'Dress for Success'

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**D**IANE MEADE decided to splurge and buy Madeline that dream of a dress in the children's catalog.

Sure, it was more than she intended to spend — almost \$60 with tax and shipping — but it was worth the fun her little girl would have wearing the billowy little miss wedding gown.

The dress arrived, and Madeline was in heaven. It was just like in the picture — except for a few minor things. The white fabric was a bit cheesy, and the stitching was basting-length — twice what it should have been.

The decorative ribbons had been glued on. Seams were skimpy and unfinished.

Within seven hours of playing time, the dress had split at the seams, the ribbons dangled and the hem was almost gone. The dream dress was unwearable.

Madeline wanted a new one, and Meade was facing the fact she had just paid almost \$10 for every hour her little girl spent in her now-tattered birthday dress.

Meade's frustration and Madeline's disappointment were to transform months later into a project so positive that Meade has made it her career.

In short, Meade figured if children's play manufacturers won't come up with quality dress-up clothing, she will. And she has.

But she has far surpassed the wonderful wedding design that came apart. Meade's children's fantasy dresses are so special that they're named and numbered. No two are alike. And don't even dream of calling them "costumes." Meade says her creations are meant to provide years of make-believe.

And that's just the beginning. Meade, 35, of Watsonville, has worked at everything from

she visited the Small Business Development Center at Cabrillo College for advice on getting started. She learned to make a detailed business plan prospectus, which has become her career bible. Every resource, every product, every minute and every penny are recorded.

And that's essential, says Elza Minor, who, along with other staff members at the Small Business Development Center helped Meade carefully prepare to go into business so she wouldn't be among the 60 percent of those whose new enterprises fail within 12 months.

"We provided her — we provide anyone — with in-depth (business) counseling," Minor said. "We believe most definitely that it's essential (to plan carefully). Businesses fail usually because of mismanagement or of not having a handle on what you're doing."

Meade found the Small Business Development Center's fee agreeable. It's free, and services are available to anyone. The agency is funded by the state Department of Commerce and the federal Small Business Administration.

The local office also works with the Service Corps of Retired Executives, which provide a good orientation — and a dose of reality — to those like Meade who are interested in starting a business.

Before a single thing is sold, dozens of hours of preparation are required to be sure the endeavor is feasible. Even growth and expansion must be carefully planned, Meade said.

Since she started making dresses, she has added four new products to her line, but not until she researched, timed and field-tested the kid-sized butterfly wings, fancy capes, satin and netting ballet skirts, and



Kurt Ellison

Madeline Meade enjoys her job modeling for Diane E's Dress-ups, her mom's business.

times," she reworks them into gowns that little girls imagine only princesses get to wear. All are hand-washable.

Meade is committed to preserving the dress itself, but the sky's the limit when it comes to dolling them up. She drapes, she ruffles and she gathers. Dresses — often from wedding parties — are hiked up but not cut up, providing room for several years' growth. Skirts are

nents that go into dramatic play for both girls and boys.

"Most props are things a child would find in real life," she said. "Clothes, dolls, even camping equipment."

She said fancy dresses for young children's play may reflect this country's cultural value of being adorned and beautiful.

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that they're named and numbered. No two are alike. And don't even dream of calling them "costumes." Meade says her creations are meant to provide years of make-believe.

And that's just the beginning. Meade, 35, of Watsonville, has worked at everything from being a nanny to being on the staff at Marine World-Africa USA. She has owned her own restaurant and tavern, and has completed a chef's apprenticeship at the prestigious Hyatt Regency Hotel in Austin, Texas.

Before that, she sold Kirby vacuum cleaners and made a killing. But none of those occupations has come close to the satisfaction she gets from creating little works of art that she says are the beginning of safe and wholesome fun for children.

She calls her one-woman company Diane E's Dress Ups. The "E" is for her middle name, Elizabeth. Until the rain lets up and her husband, John, completes her new studio on their property, the Diane E factory is the kitchen table and her living room. Her warehouse is the bedroom, and her fashion shows star Madeline, "53/4," Meade's other daughter, Hannah, 2, and their friends.

And business is booming. Meade says meticulous planning is part and parcel of her early success. When she decided to make a career of the dresses,

planned, Meade said.

Since she started making dresses, she has added four new products to her line, but not until she researched, timed and field-tested the kid-sized butterfly wings, fancy capes, satin and netting ballet skirts, and non-skid decorated ballerina slippers she now sells.

As with her dresses, Meade creates the products to be what she considers "developmental toys." The butterfly wings are have been modeled after designs found on real butterflies. The capes often include adornment such as feather boas. The ballet skirts have a hook-and-loop closure that allows them to fit waist sizes 19 through 26 inches. And the glitter-painted shoes she buys, then decorates, complete the look of her dresses.

She said she just couldn't stand the thought of little feet tottering dangerously in adult high heels or slipping around in plastic "jellies." The ballet shoes have another important quality, Meade says: They're blessedly quiet.

But her first love is the dresses, even though she doesn't design or make the original garments. Rather, she buys formals from secondhand stores and after a thorough washing and what she calls "inspecting every quarter inch at least four

serving the dress itself, but the sky's the limit when it comes to dolling them up. She drapes, she ruffles and she gathers. Dresses — often from wedding parties — are hiked up but not cut up, providing room for several years' growth. Skirts are often scalloped at the bottom for ease of movement — even princesses like to run, she says — and waists are pulled in with sashes. Most dresses can be worn by children of different sizes — and they look good on them all, she said.

Meade's trademark is her baubles — sparklies, she calls them. She shops flea markets for rhinestone necklaces and pins, fake rubies and emeralds, which she sews on the collars, skirts and bodices if she thinks they'll look good. Fancy is a mild word to describe the combinations and effects she achieves.

All of this costs Meade time and money.

"I think my husband thought I was off in dreamland at first," she said. "It seemed like I was always out spending money. But he's become a believer."

Meade made the first dress as a birthday present. It was the second thing she'd ever sewn in her life. Madeline was invited to a little girl's party and the Meade family budget was tight. So Meade went to a local thrift shop, bought an adult party dress for a few dollars and recreated it into a play-dress-up formal for the birthday girl. It was an instant hit.

That doesn't surprise Marcia Meyer, director of the Child Development Resource Center for the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

"Dramatic play is an important component of any child development program," Meyer said. "It's a way for children to make sense out of their world."

Meyer added that dress-up dresses, capes and other props such as those Meade makes could be part of many compo-

equipment."

She said fancy dresses for young children's play may reflect this country's cultural value of being adorned and beautiful.

Madeline's friends probably weren't aware of that. All Meade knows is that Madeline was invited to birthday parties faster than Meade could stitch. In those days, she sewed by hand and it wasn't unusual to spend 20 hours or more per gown.

Today, she has streamlined her operation by using a rotary cutter, a sewing machine and a child-sized dress form she named "Robogal."

After supplying Madeline's friends with the fantasy dresses, Meade realized there was a commercial possibility. She had worked at Zannotto's Pasta and More in Scotts Valley as a sous chef and later at D.J.'s Restaurant in Watsonville before Hannah was born, but with two small girls, she wanted to stay home and still earn money.

She tried raising and drying flowers, but the hours were long, the work was hard and the research she did quickly told her the profit would be next to nothing. She developed a hand-held baby food, but health restrictions prohibited her from manufacturing it at home. The dresses seemed a natural.

She started looking for help with her idea, knowing intuitively that to make a decent profit, she needed professional advice. Through the Small Business Development program and a couple of books written by people who make a living with their crafts, Meade began her research and planning. She sent her telephone bill into triple digits talking to chambers of commerce, craft fair organizers, other artists and dozens of suppliers.

She came to know the value of a plan early on when she realized that seven dresses she sold to an exclusive toy store in Carmel weeks before had actu-



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## Neighbor Whitney Damiani wears her favorite.

ally cost her a dollar each. That lesson, she said, was cheap compared to what it could have been had she not started figuring the cost of her garments in both labor and materials.

She has sold nearly 60 dresses, mostly by word of mouth. Her plans for this year include a minimum of eight craft shows that are known for high quality merchandise. She'll take special orders and maybe have an open house or two.

This time of year is devoted to production. The hardest part, she said, is trying to sew with a little girl on her lap. Other dif-

ficulties are having her daughters heartbroken because their latest "favorite dress" is going on the sales rack, or trying to find supplies in the cramped quarters, then trying to find room for an in-progress garment when all of the house except the bathroom is filled with Diane E's materials.

There are other challenges as well.

"Sometimes I get frightened," she said. "Fear of failure, fear of success. When that happens I focus on one thing. I literally do one little step at a time. I also pray a lot, I really do."



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## Diane Meade loves to adorn with 'sparklies.'