

A D.C. Boutique Goes Out in Style

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When I opened the store, I chose the Dupont Circle area because almost every embassy in the world was located within two blocks.

There was a bookstore at Connecticut Avenue and R Street, which sold national and international newspapers, and where some people told me that Jackie Kennedy would come to browse. (It's now a corner location for a Starbucks.)



Rosemary Reed in 2003, holding up an unusual wedding gown at Toast & Strawberries, her recently shuttered Dupont Circle boutique.
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I wanted to bring innovative clothing and accessories to Washington. We designed and made dresses to order, and tried to reach out to the world around us, opening our doors to poets, artists, students and the community.

Now, we have closed Toast & Strawberries after nearly 40 years of business, and what I will miss most are the wonderful people who responded to it.

The concept sounds simple but in 1966 there were few small boutiques in the area and hardly any that did their own design work or which would sell the work of local designers. Also, Washington was still a smallish, Southern town, just stepping out of a very segregated past, and I thought that the store and this location could be a focal point for a diverse clientele.

This came true, but it wasn't easy. I didn't realize that the west side of Connecticut Avenue was an informal boundary between white and black Washington. I had trouble opening at our first location, on Connecticut and R, where Teasism is now. I was in my twenties and the landladies said I was too young. I went to the D.C. Human Rights Office, which persuaded them to rent to me.

But once we got going, we found that people were supportive and interested. It was the beginning of the 1960s miniskirt era. Ministers were denouncing from the pulpit women who wore short skirts. Times have really changed. Ministers denounce, but the belly button is shown all over.

One item we enjoyed selling was the baby back carrier, the Snugli. I found it when I was pregnant in 1967. It was designed by a former Peace Corps couple. We worked with them and sold hundreds to all sorts of families. The sense of time passing was really strong when the grown children of our customers from the 1970s would come to the store and introduce themselves as a "Snugli baby."

Later, in the 1970s, we got into ethnic fashions. Now I see that look a lot today -- African, Indian prints, floral skirts with uneven hems. The '80s brought the "Dress for Success" look. Now it's work casual.

The world swirls on.

In the '90s, we moved from R Street to Connecticut Avenue at the height of the terrible AIDS period of seeing people on crutches, haggard and begging, three or four on a block.

We lost customers, designers and staff to AIDS. It's heartening that we've learned how to manage that disease so people can continue to live and be productive.

Once, I remember a customer coming back to the store and saying, "I got rid of him!" I wondered what I had said to her; when you chat with people, you sometimes let comments slip casually. She said, "You said someone was killing my self-esteem. . . . I thought about your words and realized that the 'someone' was my husband. . . . I got rid of him!"

My lease at my current location was to run out in 10 years.

I had thought I would want to close, but I thought, "maybe not -- look for a building to buy." I also looked for another location.

Nothing seemed right, so in mid-September we did what we are known for and what we do best: We had a Sale/Fashion Show, and party! We invited people to bring or wear their oldest Toast outfit, and come and share memories. The response to our closing party was great!

We saw people holding up all sorts of things and explaining that they wore them to parties and got great compliments. People came with dresses from the 1970s. Everyone told their "my special Toast dress" story. I certainly can't remember each wedding dress we designed, each maternity outfit we sold, each afternoon of poetry or song at the store, each designer whose jewelry we sold, each person who modeled for us -- but I found that customers, poets, musicians, designers and models remembered their special events -- and Toast's contribution to them.

It is very demanding to run a small store -- hiring and supervising staff, buying merchandise, and all the myriad other details of a small business. It was a good run.

I have great memories. I am in good health. I plan to add another edition to my book about African American dressmakers and other business ideas.

I was a little afraid of being overwhelmed at closing day.

I hoped I could thank people and be gracious. I mostly hoped that I wouldn't start to tear up and cry. In the process of closing, I tried not to go crazy with all the details -- selling display cases and merchandise, taking down signs, changing phone lines, worrying about placing staff. I tried to do it well; I remembered how hard it is to move. You lose things and find things. I understand that it is relatively easy to keep a train running.

It's really hard to stop it.