Written by Carol Pomeday
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Photo by Sam Arendt **Inspired by a Barbie Doll outfit, Madalyn Manzeck designed and made "the dress of her dreams" for her junior prom. It's not surprising she's aspiring to a career in fashion design.**

When Madalyn Manzeck of the Town of the Belgium attends her junior prom at Living Word Lutheran High School in Jackson, she will wear her dream dress — a red mermaid-style gown made of satin charmeuse with an organza skirt and detachable, off-the-shoulder shawl. The skirt is lined with a funky lipstick-pattern fabric.

"I love it. It's the dress of my dreams," said Manzeck as she twirled in front of a three-way mirror while wearing it last week. "I'm glad it finally came to life after all my work."

Manzeck, 17, designed and sewed the gown herself — she got the idea from a Barbie doll outfit — under the tutelage of Nichole Schneider of Fabric Shapers in Thiensville.

"I wanted to make it for last year's prom, but I didn't realize how long it would take," Manzeck said.

"I took another year so it was exactly what I wanted."

Manzeck altered a standard pattern to make a custom pattern for her one-of-a-kind gown. She

cut out and hand-sewed an inexpensive muslin version that she fitted on a dressmaker's form set to her measurements. Schneider made final adjustments while Manzeck wore the muslin dress.

Manzeck made another pattern to match the muslin dress, then cut out the pieces in the beautiful fabrics.

"It was kind of an exciting feeling because you know you're taking something that's inanimate and you're creating something wonderful," she said.

She hand basted the gown before sewing it. Then numerous tiny adjustments were made by Schneider while Manzeck tried on the dress.

Manzeck traced the adjustments Schneider marked with pins and completed the alterations.

She used netting to pouf the skirt, which starts a few inches above her knees and has a train in back.

A pleated organza shawl that fits snuggly off the shoulders was Madalyn's idea.

"That's a Madalyn original," her teacher said. "She definitely has a natural flair for fashion design. She has the ideas and likes to make it happen. She's very detail oriented and wants it to be right."

What's amazing is that Manzeck had never used a sewing machine before she started taking lessons from Schneider in October 2009. That year, she got a sewing machine for Christmas from her parents Vicki and Matt.

Schneider, who has a degree in fashion design from Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, is tough on Manzeck, who wants to pursue a career in the fashion world.

"If I don't like an eighth of an inch of something, I make her take it out and do it over," Schneider said. "There is no point in doing something halfway.

"She's come a long way in a short period of time. Satin charmeuse is difficult to work with. It's very slippery and fine, and it shows every little body imperfection so we had to do a lot of fitting — not that Madalyn has a lot of body imperfections."

Manzeck learned fashion terminology, how to sketch designs, make patterns and sew muslin samples, as well as draping and fitting techniques.

She also went with Schneider on fabric-buying trips to Chicago and Milwaukee and learned about top fashion designers, both current trendsetters and early innovators.

When she went into a Chicago fabric outlet to select fabric for her prom dress, Manzeck was overwhelmed by the choices.

“I knew I wanted red, but when we started looking at champagne and light pink, I lost it and started crying,” she said. “I had a meltdown.”

“It was sensory overload, but it was good for her to experience it,” Schneider said. “When you get into that situation, you can’t believe there is so much to choose from.”

Manzeck worked with Schneider once a week for 2-1/2 hours at a time. During her spring break, she went to the shop every day. Manzeck also arranged a three-week winter work experience with Schneider that was approved by her principal.

Manzeck put in about 400 hours over nine months designing and making the prom dress.

She also made several dresses on her own, including a gold-sequinned mini dress for the school’s turnabout dance in March.

“My friends couldn’t believe I made the dress. They really liked it,” Manzeck said. “It (learning to sew) has really changed the way I shop. I find myself looking at seams and checking if patterns match.”

Manzeck also designed a maxi floral cotton sundress and a costume for a Greek-themed party last year.

Now that her prom dress is finished, Manzeck, with Schneider’s help, is developing a portfolio, which is required for admission to most fashion schools.

Manzeck, a junior, would like to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology or Parsons New School for Design, both in New York City.

Vicki Manzeck is highly supportive of her daughter’s efforts, but has no knowledge of or desire to sew. Nor could the girl get help from her grandmothers, who no longer sew.

But both her maternal and paternal great-grandmothers were expert seamstresses who helped support their families with their needlework.

The material for Manzeck’s prom dress cost $80, but that doesn’t include the sewing instruction.

“I’m absolutely amazed at what she’s done. I’m very proud of her,” Mrs. Manzeck said. “Even if she doesn’t go into fashion, it’s worth it. It’s a lifelong skill.”

Manzeck will wear her dream dress to the prom, but she’s not expecting a prince on a white horse. She’s going with girlfriends.