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How a Belgium bride designed her wedding dress, sewed it with her mother and staged a vintage-themed wedding celebration that guests are still talking about

Like most prospective brides, Amanda Gonwa of Belgium went to several bridal shops with her mother Karen and bridesmaids, trying on dozens of wedding gowns.

"I did it mostly for the experience," Amanda said. "I always knew I would be making my dress with my mom. I love to sew, and she made my sister's dress. Now, it was my turn."

Amanda poured through bridal magazines, noting the features she liked. She then sketched her dream gown and her mother helped make it come alive.

Amanda knew it would not be a problem for her mother, a well-known seamstress who taught Amanda to sew when she was a child. Karen Gonwa used to make bridal and bridemaid dresses, but now concentrates on alterations through her home business K&M Creations.

Working on the wedding dress with her youngest child was fun and poignant, Karen said.

Amanda, who loves vintage clothing, especially from the 1950s, wanted her gown to reflect designs of that era.

Her one-strap candlelight gown featured a fitted bodice of embroidered lace trimmed with beads and sequins over silk and a puckered sweetheart neckline. The strap was covered with fabric flowers made by Amanda. A wide silk overlay wrapped the skirt on an angle with three layers of lace ruffles cascading to the floor.

Amanda wore a stiff birdcage veil cocked on an angle and gathered in back with real and fabric flowers.

Amanda used pearls from necklaces that belonged to her grandmother and great-grandmother in the flowers that adorned the dress, veil and shoes.

“That (the pearls) was the something old,” said Amanda, who also made flowers for the bridemaids’ and flower girls’ dresses.

After the grand march at the reception, Amanda removed the bottom two ruffles of her dress, bustled the long side of the overlay and danced the night away in a short, flouncy skirt.

Her husband David Jensen changed from his formal black jacket to a vintage white dinner jacket for the reception.

The two love to dance, so they spent much of their time on the dance floor, encouraging others to join them. David chose the 1970s songs the band played.

“I never saw so many people dance at a wedding,” Karen Gonwa said.

The gown was just the beginning of what turned into a unique wedding with fun features that kept guests moving about, some shaking their heads and others smiling and saying, “That’s Amanda and David.”

David is as passionate about vintage items as Amanda, so they incorporated many collectibles into their wedding decorations.

“We knew the look we wanted and started looking for things at flea markets in Chicago and Wisconsin,” Amanda said.

“We really wanted it to be a reflection of both of us. We wanted to put our own mark on it.”

The couple were married Nov. 20, 2010, at Mary Queen of Heaven Catholic

Church in West Allis, the groom’s parish. His grandparents were among the parish founders.

The bridal party’s transportation after the ceremony was an orange 1957 Volkswagon bus.

“It was noisy, it didn’t have any heat and it broke down a couple times,” Amanda said. “It was perfect.”

The reception was held at the Peck Pavilion at the Milwaukee County Zoo, where David worked when he was in high school.

Picking up on the animal theme, David gave his groomsmen animal cuff links that reflected

their personalities or interests.

Amanda filled Chinese take-out containers with small animal toys for the children. The place cards also featured animals.

The candles that lit the way to the rustic reception hall were set in Mason canning jars weighted with sand from Harrington Beach State Park in the Town of Belgium, where Amanda spent many summer days.

The bride and bridesmaids put their bouquets into water-filled canning jars to decorate the head table.

“The Mason jars came from home. We can a lot because of Dad’s fruit trees,” Amanda said.

David’s father grew the Japanese lanterns that decorated the church and reception for the fall wedding.

The flower girls scattered fall leaves instead of rose pedals before the bride walked down the church aisle with her father Richard.

Amanda made pinwheel fabric flowers in fall colors for pew and other decorations.

Guests put wedding cards into vintage suitcases set on the gift table, and old soda bottle crates were used for decorations.

The couple had wedding cupcakes instead of a cake. David’s aunt made 400 cupcakes, which served as centerpieces for the tables.

Instead of signing a guest book, guests signed quilt squares that Amanda has started making into a wedding quilt.

The couple set up a photo booth, using a 1950s flower-patterned tablecloth as a backdrop. Guests chose props, such as mustaches, beards, bushy eyebrows and glasses, then posed behind picture frames for their portraits.

“We wanted people to get up and move around and meet each other. We wanted it to be a fun wedding,” Amanda said.

On each table, there was a fact about the wedding or the couple. Guests were encouraged to go from table to table, collecting the information.

Guests learned the suitcases not only carried out the vintage theme, but also reflected the many trips on Amtrak that the couple made when David worked in Chicago and Amanda was completing her senior year at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee.

Their honeymoon was an Amtrak trip along the West Coast. The couple flew into Seattle,

where they boarded the train and headed south.

The couple met at Cardinal Stritch when David was an upperclassman and Amanda was a freshman. David was a resident assistant who helped Amanda's family move her into the dorm.

Amanda told her mother, "I'm going after that guy."

David played drums in a band at the time, and Amanda and her friends often went to see him play.

"We were attracted to each other, but never got up the courage to talk to each other," Amanda said.

"We started talking on Facebook (shortly after David moved to Chicago). We both wanted to see this concert, and he invited me to it."

The rest is history.

Amanda, who graduated from Cedar Grove-Belgium High School, is a kindergarten teacher at Lincoln Park Preparatory School in Lincoln Park, Ill. David is art director for TriSect, a Chicago graphic arts design company.

Image Information: VINTAGE-LOOKING BRIDE Amanda Gonwa Jensen designed her gown and veil, which were made by her mother, and wore a fur stole that belonged to a friend's grandmother. Two rows of lace were removed to create a short dress for the reception.
Photo by Hanle Productions