

Grand Junction Daily Sentinel

07.12.03 The Barbie Bond

By ANN WINTERHOLTER, *The Daily Sentinel*

Laura Smith has boxes and boxes of clothes.

For some women that is unremarkable.

But in 82-year-old Laura's case, all the clothes are for her 104 Barbies.

We're talking dress suits, fully lined.

Fine satin ball gowns and wedding dresses with off-the-shoulder sleeves.



LAURA SMITH WORKS ON Barbie clothing in the sewing room in the home she shares with her daughter, Dot. CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel

Swimsuits for hot days and costumes for Halloween.

Sleeping bags for camping.

And Laura sewed almost all of them.

She recently made several purple fake-fur coats in preparation for winter. And, yes, those will be nicely lined, too.

If they weren't, "that would be too uncomfortable for Barbie," Laura told her daughter, Dot Smith, 53, who she lives with in Grand Junction.

Laura's Barbies have become more environmentally conscious than they used to be, Dot said.

Years ago, Laura made two Barbie mink coats out of old collars.

"I would guess that she's made more than 10,000 outfits in her lifetime," Dot said.

"It's just fascinating!" Laura said as she looked over her Barbies, which are displayed on shelves in her sewing room.

"I don't know which one I love the most," she said.

It's sort of a tie between the 1960 "Ponytail #3" dark-haired Barbie that Dot played with when she was 8 and the 1985 Peaches & Cream Barbie.

The 1960 Barbie "has a kind of dignity to her," Laura said.

On this day, both are wearing gold dresses, and Peaches & Cream has her hair in a fancy updo.

Dot is the household's official Barbie hairstylist, even though Laura was a hairdresser when she was young.

Dot once asked her mother what she would have done with her life if she hadn't married and had four children.

Laura said she would have gone to Hollywood and become a fashion designer, Dot said. And judging by the way she clothes her plastic princesses, Laura likely would have made it in the movie-star capital.

Instead, she has sold Barbie vogue to neighborhood children.

Years ago, "I sold them for a nickel or dime apiece." Kids don't have a lot of money, she said.

But she sold so many that she was able to buy her late husband, Bill, a jacket.

She still sells Barbie clothes, but the price has gone up. "Some of them are 75 cents and some are \$15," she said.

It's the wedding dresses that sell in the \$12 to \$15 price range.

Laura uses premade or modified patterns or makes her own patterns from pictures in magazines.

Laura will take a pattern and say something like, "Oh, this is so inaccurate. Who would wear it? It's fits more like a bag than a dress." Then she'll rework the pattern so it really fits the doll, Dot said.

Laura said she's not sure how long it takes her to make a dress because she's usually making several at once, she said.

She uses tiny buttons from craft stores for the outfits but has some older ones packed away for special use. The older bottoms are better made and even smaller than the ones available now.

Velcro is the fastener she uses most these days. It's easier for kid fingers to manage, she said.

Always fashion conscious, Laura covers for the not-so-stylish Velcro by putting things like small beads up the back of a dress to look like buttons.

She likes lace, bows, silk roses, ruffles and top-grade satin — it just hangs more gracefully.

A woman once brought Laura photos of her daughters in their wedding dresses — front and back — along with a couple of their old Barbies and asked Laura if she could recreate the dresses for the dolls.

Underestimating the petite fashion designer with more than 50 years' experience, the woman told Laura she didn't need to make one of the dresses with off-the-shoulder sleeves like the photo showed.

But the sleeves of Laura's miniature wedding dress sit on the plastic shoulder joint just right.

Dot styled the Barbies' hair similar to that of the daughters. The woman was simply amazed, mother and daughter said.

"Oh, they look just like them," Laura said proudly.

The bodice of every dress she makes is lined. The dresses hold their shape better that way, she said.

It's a matter of quality Laura won't budge on.

"That's why people like my dresses, because they don't wear out as badly," she said.

"My dresses are all made in one piece. The store clothes are several pieces" and can be harder for children to dress and undress their dolls, Laura said.

Growing up, Dot had two sets of Barbie clothes made by her mother — one set for Dot's Barbies and the other for friends to use.

"I played Barbie a lot," Dot said. She wore the breasts down on one by pulling a tube dress on and off, she said with a laugh.

After having her first doll awhile, Dot decided in the early '60s Barbie needed to become a mother.

"Barbie better get married to have a baby," her mother told her.

So Ken came along and he a Barbie dated for a long time, Dot said with a smile.

Then mother and daughter held a wedding ceremony for the two dolls, complete with a marriage license, and that Christmas Ken and Barbie had a baby, Dot said.

The baby was a 1963 model and came with a Barbie babysitter outfit, Dot said.

Dot was 12 years old when she packed up Barbie.

"She quit playing, but her mama didn't," Laura said.

For Laura, having a daughter along with her three sons was an answer to prayer.

She used to say, "If the dear Lord gave me a daughter, I'd be happy."

Born and raised in Iowa, Laura's mother died when she was 4 months old.

At Christmas she got trucks, just like her brother.

"She didn't have a chance to be a little girl, and she wanted to be a girl," Dot said.

Laura made paper dolls until her cousins gave her a Hollywood star cutout.

"Oh, it just looked like something out of this world to me," she said. "I made all these outfits for it."

When Laura was 15, her father moved the small family to the Front Range.

After marrying and starting her own family, Laura moved to a Parachute-area ranch with Bill.

Her mother was a snappy dresser, Dot said. "But she wasn't high maintenance. She had class."

Laura had two styles — one for house and ranch work and keeping up with four children and another for going places.

"When she dressed up, she did it right," Dot said.

Laura would wear stylish hats at an angle, high heels, gloves and belts to accent a dress.

Even now, when they go out the shoes and purse must match, said Dot, who is a teacher for developmentally disabled students at Mesa View Elementary School.

The same goes for Laura's Barbies. She's in the process of making several thread crochet dresses, elaborate affairs in the vein of Scarlett O'Hara. There are matching parasols and hats to be decorated with feathers and silk flowers.

It's taking her months to make the outfits, but when the clothes are done, she'll have a shelf filled with Barbies in crochet dresses, Laura said.

That will take some reorganization in the sewing room, though.

Currently, a Barbie on one shelf is giving a concert on a grand piano while others sit around and listen.

On another shelf, Barbies and Kens dance the days away while across the room King Arthur and Queen Guinevere stand with their court in a corner.

There's a wedding dress Barbie shelf, the country-clothing shelf, the theme Barbie shelf — with Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz" in honor of Dot — the kitchen shelf and the Barbie knockoffs shelf.

One of the knockoffs, wearing a bright multicolored dress, has rotating hair. Half of the hair is brown and half is blonde.

"We call her 'The Exorcist Doll,' " Dot said.

The doll was sent to Laura as a gift from a friend of Dot's who is also a Barbie doll collector.

She and Dot haven't officially renamed any of the dolls. Some have nicknames, like Valentine Barbie in a red dress, but that's about it.

Laura's more recent Barbie acquisitions have been Christmas and birthday gifts.

When Laura first began collecting dolls, Bill surprised her by coming home from an auction with a Barbie dollhouse. Inside were three Barbies, two of which were '60s "Bubble-heads" with puffy, short hair.

One still has the red stain of lipstick some previous owner used to make her Barbie even more beautiful.

Older dolls like the "Bubble-heads" are nicer than today's Barbies, Laura said.

The fingers on the hands were once separate and the plastic softer, she said, and the eyelashes stuck out dramatically.

Ken has changed over the years, too. At one point he had fuzzy hair instead of plastic locks, said Laura, rubbing her finger over the head of a doll.

Ken is taller and more "muscle" than he used to be, Dot said.

Laura's Malibu Ken the pair found five years ago at a going-out-of-business sale where she and Dot bought about 30 dolls for \$2.50 apiece. They dug through boxes of dolls that weren't in the best shape.

"It looked like a holocaust doll unit," Dot said.

Among the many blondes they picked out a few brunettes and redheads, the rarest and most valuable Barbies, she said.

Laura's never had her 104-doll collection appraised.

For her, value isn't based on a mint condition box and Barbie that's never been touched.

Being able to dress up the Barbies, watching her granddaughters and great-granddaughters play with them and seeing visitors' admiration is what is valuable.

"It's all fun," she said. "I've had a wonderful life. I can't complain."



CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel
EIGHTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD LAURA SMITH has made almost all the clothes her 104 Barbies wear. I would guess that she's made more than 10,000 outfits in her lifetime," says her daughter, Dot, who styles the dolls' hair. Barbies crowd the shelves in Laura's sewing room. Her organization system includes a wedding dress Barbie shelf, a country-clothing shelf, a theme Barbie shelf, a kitchen shelf and a Barbie knockoffs shelf.