

Diane Cornelius brings the joy of weddings to Haiti

With her aid, 109 Haitian brides have tied the knot in her gowns, in a land where a wedding is far more than simply a ceremony.

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Diane Cornelius of Lexington, KY is collecting wedding dresses for brides in Haiti. She brings donated wedding gowns to Haiti and holds mass weddings and sets them up with a bridal-dress-rental business, to not only lift women's spirits but help them increase their status and economic situation. / Jonathan Palmer/USA TODAY

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This young lady, her husband and 2 sisters came from a neighboring village. Walking 2 hours each way. / Kris Watts



Three of the brides in St. Louis du Nord. / Kris Watts

In a medical clinic in Haiti, 19 wedding dresses hang from shelves and IV poles. Diane Cornelius, a bridal store owner from Lexington, Ky., is helping to outfit brides for two group weddings to be held that week.

The clinic is on the grounds of Northwest Haiti Christian Mission, a non-profit that serves one of the poorest regions in the country. Outside the mission gates in Saint-Louis-du-Nord, the roads

are unpaved, electricity is scarce, and running water is a luxury. Jobs are rare, and many people earn less than \$1 a day.

Rolande Etienne's groom was a barber before a road accident left him unable to stand for long periods of time. She is shy as Cornelius and a Haitian translator fit her for a dress. But when Cornelius places a veil on her head and declares "belle," Etienne smiles. A few of the other brides joke, but most are somber. Outside, the grooms are just as serious while Cornelius' husband, Joe, sizes them for rings.

When a friend approached Cornelius in 2008 with the idea of bringing wedding gowns to northwest Haiti — gowns from the previous season that she could no longer market — Cornelius figured the weddings would be huge celebrations.

Then she met the brides and came to understand that in Haiti, marriages are not just cause for a party, rather a gateway to a better life. A woman who has been a member of a church choir for years but was never allowed to join them during service, once married, is allowed to sing. A middle-aged woman who has never been addressed by a title, once married, will answer to Madame.

Janeil Owen, executive director of Northwest Haiti Christian Mission, has observed the profound effect marriage can have on a Haitian's life. "It changes the way you walk, carry your head and interact," he says. Married Haitians often earn higher wages. Their children may even be treated better at school.

Since her first trip in March 2009, Cornelius has carted dresses from her shop to these group weddings every six months. She has dressed 109 brides. "To me, a wedding means joy, hope and a future," says Cornelius.

On this journey, she also has come to supply one woman with enough wedding dresses to launch a rental business, the first of many that Cornelius hopes to foster. Bridal shops are still rare in Haiti, and those that exist are in the bigger cities and are economically out of reach to many.

The second wedding takes place in La Presqu'île, an impoverished fishing village on the northwest tip of Haiti. Cornelius fits Louisilia Magiste, 37, for a dress. Without Cornelius lending the dress and footing the bill for wedding rings, marriage licenses and a reception, Magiste would not be able to afford to marry the father of her five children.

"When you are not married, it's like you are someone with a bad sign on you that says, 'Hey, this person is an outcast from society,'" Magiste says through a translator. "But when you are married, the sign is removed and everybody sees you as a complete person."