The Bride Wore White

A community gathers to fulfill a six-year-old's wedding dreams

January 1, 1997 By Mary Gail Hare

If the local newspaper ran a wedding announcement, it would list the pertinent details of the ceremony and the bride's backgroun. She is a six-year-old first-grader with HIV, whose parents fulfilled her wish for a dream wedding.

Mechelle Evermore Fernekees lives in Carroll County, Maryland with the family that adopted her four years ago. The wedding took place in their living room, followed by a reception in the kitchen, family room and dining area.

Since this event was all make-believe, there was no need for a groom. "A groom is ever more irrelevant here than in most weddings," the mother of the bride said.

Mechelle wore white satin trimmed with pearls, silky ribbons and pale pink roses. A train, made from a lace curtain panel, trailed behind her floor-length gown. Attached to the matching white hat and veil, a spray of silk baby's breath tilted to one side of her head. The bride occassionally chewed on the flowers dangling near her mouth.

With hospital stays becoming more frequent and AIDS threatening. Paulette Fernekees decided her daughter's fantasy wedding could not wait. She asked a bridal-store manager if she could purchase a miniature dress for her HIV positive daughter; the shop owner gladly donated the dress.

A baker brough a tiered, frosted cake with pink roses to match the gown, and received an invitation to the wedding. "This is a wonderful family," he said. "We need a world full of people like them."

The bride stipulated formal wear for her guests. Her nine- and seven-year-old brothers fidgeted uncomfortably in starched shirts and ties, but they solemnly acted their parts as attendants. A school friend in a frilly floral print served as bridesmaid. Young cousins arrived in previously stored-away sequins and satin. Grandparents drove in from Florida; aunts and cousins came from New Jersey.

Guests waited patiently at the foot of the stairs, and a cousin played "Only You" on the piano. The

bridal procession was about halfway down the stairs, which were dotted with stuffed animals, when Michelle took a peek at the crowd and developed cold feet. She sunk to the landing and said, “I don’t really want to get married.”

An exasperated brother complained, “I can’t hold this train forever.” The older brother threatened, “If you don’t come now, we’ll eat all your cake.”

Paulette came to the rescue. She cradled Mechelle in her arms, carried her down the remaining steps and danced her around the room. “All these special people are doing this for you,” she said. “All because they love you.”

A smile returned to the calmed bride. She skipped the ceremony-none had been planned anyway-and went right to the cake.

While the guests sang “The Bride Cuts the Cake,” mother and daughter sliced into the bottom tier and pulled out a thick piece. With an impish grin, Mechelle quickly shoved the cake into her mother’s mouth.

“God bless my daughter and granddaughter,” Mechelle’s grandmother said. “May they both live a long, long time.”

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