


**Life After
St. Mary's**
Princess Fantasies

Retired Teacher Turns to Dressmaking

by Robin Bates, Professor of English

There is something magical about a Linda Perkins Chakales '65 dress. Since retiring from the St. Mary's County school system two years ago, the former home economics teacher has turned her hand to making children's clothes, and her dresses are finding an enthusiastic audience.

"Many girls dream of being princesses," says Dirk Griffith '79, talking about his daughter's love of her specially made dress, "and Linda helps them have that fantasy."

The dress Griffith is referring to is an Easter dress, long and flowing and trimmed with lace. He says that his daughter wears it to every party.

That's the way it is with Linda's clothes: people fall in love with them. Since she retired, Linda has been making special dresses for commemoration ceremonies, for weddings, for religious holidays, for dress-up. Once a woman asked her to make a christening dress out of her wedding dress. She has made several mother and daughter dresses

"Children feel special when they wear clothes that have been made just for them," Linda says.

Linda doesn't only make dresses. She also makes Halloween costumes for her two grandsons and has seen them go trick-or-treating as bunnies, monkeys, pirates, and alligators. When they were ring bearers in a family wedding, she made them little suits. Now, with a new granddaughter, she says she can't wait to begin making her clothes.

No two dresses, which can be found in B.J.'s Beauty Salon in Lexington Park, are exactly alike. In fact, that's a big part of the fun of making them. "I never know how they're going to turn out," Linda says. She starts with a simple pattern and begins playing. She is in love with fabric, its textures and colors, and says that she should probably own stock in a fabric store.

Linda says that she doesn't make much money from the dresses—"I know how little money parents have," she says—and charges just enough to keep herself in the black. She makes the dresses because they mean so much to the children. And putting children first is what Linda is about.

That's why she taught home economics, seeing it as a way for children to grow in confidence and self esteem. She talks about the thrill students have when they make something they are proud of, the challenge of making an article of clothing that expresses oneself yet does not look



Linda Perkins Chakales '65 works on a dress for Katie Griffith, daughter of Dirk Griffith '79. With the ending of home economics in the public schools, the former teachers worries that children have lost an important creative outlet.

homemade. She remembers times when she almost had to fight students about items they made in her classes: she wanted to put them in the show case and the kids wanted to take them home to show to their parents. When St. Mary's County phased out home economics and asked Linda to teach basic computer instead, she saw it as a poor trade-off and retired.

While the popular perception of home economics is kids baking cookies, Linda says it was considerably more. In home economics, she said, students had to apply English, math, and social stud-

the music teacher in *Mr. Holland's Opus* feels about them cutting music," Linda says. "He says, while you can cut the arts all you want, sooner or later the kids aren't going to have anything to read or write about."

Since retiring, Linda has been teaching a ten-year-old home schooler how to sew, and now they've moved on to cooking. She notes that kids today often don't have anything of substance to do at home. They don't get outside, they're not doing anything creative, and they lack outlets.

Linda wasn't only around when the country school system closed down its home economics program. She was also one of the last home economics majors at St. Mary's College

The St. Mary's program, run taught by Charlotte Oslund, was very demanding. Among other requirements, the students had to take chemistry classes, and Linda remembers being challenged by a Dr. Fahl.

She understands why home economics was dropped but still sees it as a loss. "It was a rather expensive program," she says. "There were three labs: a formal dining room, a massive kitchen, and a sewing lab. It took up a wing of Anne Arundel Hall."

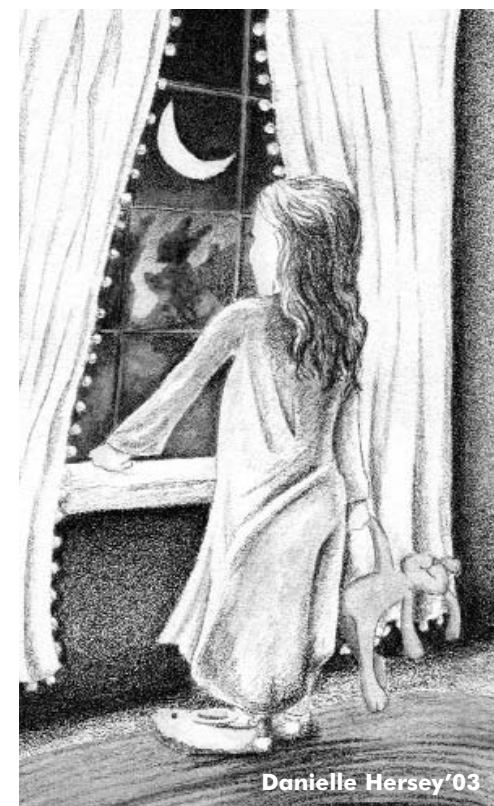
After graduating from St. Mary's Junior College, she majored in home economics at the University of Maryland and then went on to teach home economics in St. Mary's County. She married another St. Mary's alum, Dwight Chakeles '59.

Retirement hasn't slowed her down, however, and she figures that, in the past two years, she has made around 100 dresses. She is also making primitive country dolls. Having for years taught others how to sew, she is now sewing fulltime herself.

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ies to the practical skills they were learning.

"I feel the same way about cutting home economics from the curriculum that



Danielle Hersey '03