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Monday, April 26, 2004

## A dress-white dream

Mon Amie of Costa Mesa gives military brides free wedding gowns as a gesture of gratitude.

## By CHANTAL LAMERS

The Orange County Register

COSTA MESA – Jolene Weikel comes from a family of war brides. One grandmother married a soldier during the Korean War, and another wed circa World War II. Neither married in a chapel, wore a white gown or has more than one photograph from their wedding days.

"They didn't want me to be upset if I didn't have a dress," said Weikel, a 21-year-old college student from Santa Ana.

Weikel got engaged to 26-year-old Camp Pendleton Marine Todd Richardson the day before he left for Iraq in February. Left to arrange her wedding without her fiancé's participation, she didn't believe their tight budget would afford her the option of buying a wedding dress.

But on Sunday she saw an embroidered white gown. Just like she wanted.

And she took it home. For free. Compliments of Mon Amie Bridal Salon.

The Costa Mesa boutique was one of 14 independent bridal shops across the country that this month have given away 100 gowns each to women soldiers and women engaged to soldiers who have served in Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan or Kosovo.

Like Weikel, most of the 18 military brides who took advantage of Sunday's gown giveaway at Mon Amie are unsure when they'll walk down the aisle because they are uncertain when their fiancés' deployments will end.

## A special experience

The bridal shop opened its doors at 11 a.m., but some women waited in line overnight to get first pick of 150 gowns.

Kristin Freed, a 25-year-old from Oceanside, was the first in line at 3 p.m. Saturday. The petite schoolteacher was joined by her mother, Karen, and her five bridesmaids, who waited with her in shifts.

After downing three cups of coffee, Freed said, she was ready to start looking for



MILITARY ENGAGEMENT: Ivy Amazcua tries on a gown as sister Cynthia, right, serves as wardrobe consultant at Mon Amie.  
EUGENE GARCIA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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the dress she plans on wearing in her March 2005 wedding.

"It hasn't been postponed yet," said Freed, whose fiancé is in the Middle East. "I kind of have to plan for that – in case."

Recognizing many are forced to postpone their wedding days, the gown giveaway was started by a bridal shop owner in North Dakota who simply wanted to thank U.S. servicemen and women.

The news about the giveaway was spread through WeddingChannel.com e-mails and word of mouth at Camp Pendleton.

At Mon Amie, the roughly pre-selected high- end gowns laid out for women to choose from were discontinued floor models. The store's staff sorted through the gowns before the event and fixed broken zippers and torn hems.

Each woman was given all the time she wanted to pick her dress, alleviating some of the pressure, said Julie Chalupsky, the store's marketing manager.

"Because we don't have hundreds of girls lined up outside, we're taking extra time," she said. "Even if we did have 100 girls outside, we'd still try to make this a special experience."

#### 'Sparkle in her eye'

Alicia Anderson, 20, wiped tears from her eyes after deciding on a white, lacey dress. She and Andrew Parson, 21, of Camp Pendleton were married in a Vista courthouse last November but want a wedding with friends and family.

"Now we have to pick out the real details, like a place," she said, clutching her husband's arm. "We can't afford a lot of stuff; the dress is one less cost."

Ivy Amazcua, 24, of La Mirada, dressed in a gray Marine Corps T-shirt, said her fiancé was deployed for the second time in October. This time, she said, she's dealing with the separation better.

Her two sisters scoured through racks of lacey, embroidered and jewel-encrusted dresses they thought she'd like, but knew the moment she slipped on "the" dress.

"She had a sparkle in her eye that she didn't have with any of the other dresses," said 18-year-old Karina Amazcua. Weikel found it bittersweet to decide on the perfect white gown while the wedding date remains vague.

"But I'm only going to get married once in my life, so it's really important to me to have a wedding dress," she said. "And it's important to him, too."

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