These Clothes Aren't Just Old, They're Heirlooms

Marsha Henry Goff

Early to a board meeting of mostly college kids where I served as one of four — shall we say "mature" — members, I looked around for my middle-aged peers and saw only unlined faces and hard bodies. "Gee," I exclaimed, "I feel so old!"

"Well," squeaked the beardless chairman, "I'm 21."

"No offense," I said, "but I have sweaters older than you!"

I wasn't kidding. In a seldom opened chest of drawers in our guest bedroom are dyed-to-match sweaters dating back to my high school days. They share space with a much older garment, a cute little blue and white sailor suit that husband Ray wore as a baby.

The problem is that our heirloom clothes are not all confined to that chest. We're still wearing some of them. That was brought home rather forcefully to me when Ray and I attended the recent wedding of friends Dan and Kaye. Ray looked great in his gray summer suit, but confirmed his habit of eschewing suits except for weddings and funerals when he checked his inside coat pocket and pulled out a funeral card for a family friend who died in 1996.

It would have been no big deal had he done that at home or said in quieter tones, "Look, here's the program from Ike's funeral." Unfortunately, Ray made that discovery as we were standing in a line of people waiting to sign the guestbook and then I felt compelled to confess to the woman in front of me that I was wearing a 22-year-old dress.

Sure, I have younger dresses — many of them — but none seemed as appropriate for the occasion as that particular dress, timeless in its simplicity of small floral print garnished with ivory lace and accessorized with a matching lace-trimmed shawl. I've always had a fondness for that dress because of its history.

The first time I wore it was to parents' night at son Greg's high school. As I followed Greg's class schedule, second hour found me in his French class where, to my surprise, another mother wearing the same dress walked into the room. She was as startled as I, but sat in the desk next to me and joked about being twins. She confided that she had originally bought the dress for her mother who wouldn't wear it because she thought it was "too old" for her.

We discovered that our children also shared third-hour English class, where the teacher commented publicly on our look-alike status. "Yes," said the other mother as she moved to a seat several rows from me, "but she's 10 years younger and 20 pounds lighter than I am!" (Note: that was THEN!)

Don snapped this photo of Darlene, Dick, Jean, Ray, me, Betty and Charles before we went to a dinner theatre in KC.

When she walked into sixth-hour history and saw me sitting in the front row near the door, she averted her gaze and made her way to the back inside corner of the classroom, as far away from me as she could get. My guess is that when she returned home, she disposed of her dress.

Mom, Aunt Vera and shoeless me

If so, that was good for me because I have never since seen another like it.

I have a photo of me wearing that dress as I posed with Ray and a group of our friends just before traveling to a dinner theater in Kansas City to see "The Sound of Music." By now, you likely understand the charm of this dress: elegantly suitable for weddings and dinner theaters, yet casual enough for parents' nights at public schools. That's my kind of dress!

[Update 2026: Another photo shows me wearing that dress barefoot with Mom and Aunt Vera when she was visiting us from Oklahoma. The photo was taken in front of our home in Nieder Acres (now Target's parking lot) and our house now lives in Kansas City near the Speedway. Not a single house of 21 was bulldozed and I am proud of that because I realized the houses were a liability to Target and asked if we might sell our homes to people who would move them. Worked out like a charm!]

It has visited Mexico, Hawaii and as many states in the continental US as I have. And, according to husband Ray — who knows on which side his bread is buttered — "that dress still fits and looks great on you, Honey!"

Ray also appreciates a decade-old pigskin blazer I paid a small fortune for in a rash "I've-got-to-have-it!" moment. Yet if my jacket's cost is amortized over the years I have worn it, I got quite a bargain. Another advantage is that I can pair it with a wool skirt for dress-up or with jeans for dress-down occasions. And, best of all, Ray compliments me every time I wear it.

Hey, I think I'm beginning to see a pattern! I don old clothes and Ray says I look good in them. There's a message here for you men who continued reading after this column took a fashion turn. Are you getting it?