

happy
endings

Bridesmaids Revisited

BY BARBARA KLEIN

Another useless bridesmaid dress? No way! These two friends are getting a lot of wear out of their gowns in some very unusual ways.

If there's one rite of passage that bonds women, it's being a bridesmaid. Just ask Becky Whitlinger and Pat Bilock. Between them, the two Pittsburgh natives, best friends since college, have walked down the aisle 12 times. "I consider myself a professional," says Pat, 32.

They have the dresses to prove it. Among the concoctions hanging in the back of their closets are a Barbie-doll-inspired gown with oversize sleeves, an elaborate grape number (plus matching hat), and masses of tulle and taffeta puffery. "I can't bear to give any away, though I know I'll never use them," says Becky, 31, executive director of the Burger King Cancer Caring Center.

Five years ago, Becky and Pat, a special-events planner, were in the same wedding party. Their two-hundred-dollar outfits—gold-sequined bodices over gold lamé skirts—"seemed doomed to go the way of all the other bridesmaid dresses," says Becky. Sure enough, they went straight into closet purgatory.

Yet the flashy gowns were hard to ignore. "I kept thinking, What can I do with mine?" recalls Becky. Inspiration struck as she was walking by a demolition site. The former photojournalist thought it would be fun, and a little wacky, to take a picture of herself there—wearing her bridesmaid dress. She called Pat and asked if she'd snap the photo. Being a good friend, Pat agreed.

"There's a thin line between cornball and genius with Becky," says Pat. That marked the beginning of Becky

and Pat's zany adventures. In more than 50 trips taken on weekends and vacations, they've visited the White House and the Eiffel Tower, skied the slopes of Pennsylvania's Hidden Valley Resort, played the casinos of New Jersey's Atlantic City, and hung out at an alligator farm in Florida—all in their shimmering dresses.

At first glance, passersby aren't quite sure what to make of them. "A lot of people ask if we're filming a movie," says Becky. "When we tell them what's going on, they get really enthusiastic."

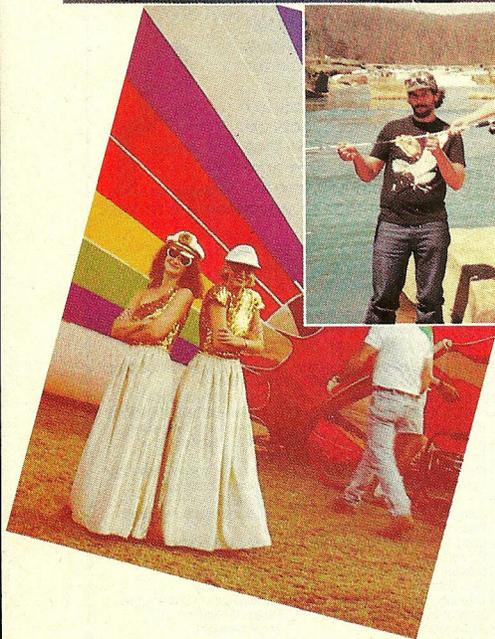
So far no one's minded, not even Becky's and Pat's boyfriends. "They've been fairly indifferent," says Pat. "I don't think guys really appreciate what all the fuss is about."

How has the bride of that now-infamous wedding responded? "We let her know right from the beginning," says Becky. "She seemed pleased we found a reason to wear the gowns again."

"Besides," adds Pat, "she's happily married and living in Texas."

Neither Becky nor Pat has any immediate plans to wed, but they've already determined their bridesmaids' destiny. "I wouldn't subject anyone to a bridesmaid gown," says Pat firmly. Although Becky wants "a traditional ceremony with all the accompanying fanfare," she promises to let her friends choose their dresses.

Meanwhile, this pair's favorite outfits are beginning to look a little worn: Becky recently ripped hers during one escapade, but, she says, "it adds character." For their next gig, they'd like to raise money for charity, says Becky. "We're hoping to put together a fundraiser—a party or a walk—where *everyone* can wear their bridesmaid dresses." □



Bridesmaids Becky Whitlinger and Pat Bilock put in an appearance at the White House; make some waves at a regatta; go fishing; and reach new heights in bridal fashion.