

HOW SHE DID IT

# SOMETHING BORROWED

With her rent-and-return gown boutique, Corie Hardee makes it easy for bridesmaids to say yes to the dress

BY RACHEL BOWIE



Corie with one of her dresses (the “Cheryl”) in her New York City headquarters.

## Ever shelled out big bucks on an ill-fitting, so-not-you bridesmaid dress that you never wore again?

Corie Hardee had, many times. While packing for a move in 2009, the London-based business consultant realized her closet was looking like something out of the movie *27 Dresses*. She dug out four old bridesmaid gowns from the back of her wardrobe, “a coral one, a red one, a purplish one and a black one with a train,” she says. Each had been pricey and worn just once. “I wondered, *If grooms men can rent tuxedos, why can’t bridesmaids rent dresses?*”

Fed up, Corie dreamed of starting a business that would save other would-be bridesmaids both cash and precious closet space. She started gathering research, using a six-week vacation (a perk of her job in the U.K.) to poll soon-to-be bridesmaids about their shopping frustrations. “If given the choice to rent or buy a dress that they won’t wear again, women told me they’d rent,” Corie says. In May 2010, she quit her job, moved back into her parents’ Washington State home and stitched together the plan for her online boutique, Little Borrowed Dress, which features 10 figure-flattering styles that rent for a wallet-friendly \$50 to \$75 a pop. Over the past four years, she’s outfitted tens of thousands of happy bridesmaids. We visited her stylish New York City office to chat and check out her fabulous frocks.

**SEW CREATIVE** “I had no fashion experience, but my job was all about strategy—I knew how to problem-solve. I ordered dress-form stencils to create sketches, then Googled ‘how to find factories,’ which led me to a guy who matched designers with manufacturers. To pay to make my first collection, I lived at my parents’ and my sister’s in Brooklyn and used \$30,000 I’d saved.”



A rack of dresses in Corie's showroom.



Corie's frocks are available in 18 colors.

**FIT FOCUS** “The most common complaint I heard from the women I surveyed was about the way bridesmaid dresses tend to fit. So I based my concept on my sister and me; she’s 5’ 4” and busty, and I’m 5’ 8”—different builds, yet we borrow clothes from each other. I looked at the things we share and the adjustable details that make them work [ties at the neck, elastic waists], then applied those details to my designs.”

**ULTIMATE STRESS TEST** “The first wedding we booked was my best friend’s. On her big day, our very rowdy guy friends kept teasing us: ‘What if we spill wine on you?’ Spills come out. We send everything to the cleaner after it’s returned. You’d have to do something extreme, like jump in a pool or set yourself on fire, to destroy a dress. Minor spills and snags happen, but they’re covered by the insurance fee in our rental price.”

**NO-DRAMA “I DO’S”** “I learned early on to establish good relationships with our factories. Our first summer, the dresses for a wedding with 10 bridesmaids—20 dresses, since we provide one free backup size per person—were stolen off the bride’s porch! Her wedding was two weeks away. She panicked. But luckily, our factory was able to quickly manufacture 20 more dresses.”

**WHEN CORIE’S TURN COMES...** “I’m single right now, but when I get married, I’ll give my friends the option to rent their bridesmaid dresses. They’re all at different points in their lives—a few have recently had kids; another is buying her first home. I’d rather they splurge on a dress they really love for date night.”

## CORIE HARDEE

Age: 35

Current home:  
New York City

### On coming up with a fresh business:

“Every great entrepreneur solves a problem that’s never been solved. Nail one down, then prove: 1) Enough people have the same problem, and 2) They’ll pay enough for your solution.”

### Go-to interview question:

“‘What’s your favorite vacation spot?’ Then I ask them to sell me on it. It shows how people talk about something they believe in.”

### On seeking a mentor:

“Look online for the e-mail of someone you respect and reach out. You’d be surprised how many people reply!”