

The look

Lifestyle

BUSINESS

Behind the Seams

Unique line of children's formal wear is designed, developed and produced in New Dorp workshop



Silk christening outfit with beaded trim and matching cap by Christie Helene.

It's less than six months until the communion fashion season officially kicks off and the Christie Helene line of dresses is well on its way to completion. And on an average Tuesday in the small New Dorp factory where the collection is created, sewing machines buzz, materials are measured, and delicate rhinestones, bows and fabric rose petals are hand-stitched onto every tiny skirt in sight.

"Communion is our biggest season," said Mary Jane Tomasino, owner and principal designer of the children's formal wear enterprise. "But you should be here at the end of the season — that's when I do my best work."

Taking a few moments out of an increasingly hectic schedule, Ms. Tomasino explained the direction that children's formal wear is taking this year.

"We've done some very different things this season," Ms. Tomasino noted, showing off at least 15 racks of dresses that are stocked high to the ceiling of the bustling workshop. "We've tried to follow the bridal market as much as possible and that has given us so many different choices."

The business, which is in its 11th year of operation, concentrates mainly on the communion market. But the enterprise also focuses on a variety of children's formal wear from christening outfits to party attire and holiday clothing.

The idea for the venture was born after Ms. Tomasino started a family and realized that there was a gap in formal attire for children.

"Years ago, it was impossible to find any stylish party dresses or flower girl dresses in the market," the designer said.

Relying on her background as a retail buyer and bridal gown designer, Ms. Tomasino — who graduated from the High School of Art & Design and received a degree in costume design from the Fashion Institute of Technology — placed an ad in the paper for dress makers to help her get the idea off the ground.

"Suddenly, we just grew one employee at a time," she said. "And the stores that we were selling to convinced me to go into shows and expand."

Today, the Christie Helene collection is featured in mostly all of Staten Island's children's boutiques — and stretches to areas of Brooklyn, southern New Jersey and beyond.

The company is named after Ms. Tomasino's youngest daughter, a 13-year-old student and star basketball player at St. Patrick's school in Richmond who ironically would rather "die than put on a dress," according to her mother.

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On the day of my visit, Christine Emigholz, the headpiece designer, arrived at a quarter past the hour. After inspecting a few of the latest designs on the fly, Ms. Tomasino handled a quick phone call about an order for handmade appliques before presenting Island store owner, Robert Moccia, with her exclusive line.

"After working with all kinds of manufacturers, it's an amazing and unusual thing to see an owner take so much personal interest in each dress that is made," Ms. Moccia, an owner of That's My Baby in Huguenot, said. "And it's wonderful to work with people from the community who know what moms on Staten Island want for their children."

Ms. Tomasino, who used to market the Christie Helene line out of Nordstrom's, said one of the most important reasons why she chooses to deal exclusively with smaller boutiques is the service.

"They [the department stores] just didn't do the line justice," she said. "The clothes got lost in the shuffle because of the store's size. The smaller boutiques, especially locally, just know how to show these clothes."

Craftspeople in the workshop range from young ladies right out of design school to older women who have been practicing their talent for years. Ms. Tomasino classified her workers as a major part of the business' creative lifeblood.

"We all work on the designs together," said Danielle Rossi, Ms. Tomasino's oldest daughter who has taken charge of the marketing aspect of Christie Helene. "That's what makes each piece in this line unique."

Within the next few years, Ms. Tomasino hopes to expand the business even further by making the Christie Helene name ever recognizable for communion shoppers. But one of the designer's most important goals is to never lose sight of the quality behind her product.

"That's what we do," Ms. Tomasino concluded. "We spend a lot of time perfecting things and pay a lot of attention to detail of the finished product. Because anybody can make a dress but we like to make it perfect."



Alexandra Buonomo of Great Falls models a hand-stitched communion dress with tulle skirt and beaded straps from the Christie Helene collection.



A red velvet holiday dress with white, feathered trim.



Stella Singh, Mary Jane Tomasino and Karen Lai look over fabric at the factory.