

**Kathryn Church and
Lorraine Church**

Needles and Pins

Dialogue on a Mother/Daughter Journey

“Needles and Pins” is an exploration into hearing, supporting and celebrating the public voice of my mother, Lorraine. It emerged over several years as part of our collaboration on “Fabrications: Stitching Ourselves Together.” This exhibit featured 22 wedding dresses that Lorraine sewed in her basement for women in central and northern Alberta between 1950 and 1995 (Church, in press; 2001a, 2001b, 1998, online; Church and Martindale, 1999). It opened at the Red Deer and District Museum, Alberta, in July 1998 and toured six other museums across Canada before reaching the end of its unexpected journey in October 2002.¹ My mother and I were present at each gala opening. We presented “Needles and Pins” on four of these occasions to audiences large and small.

Kathryn: A feminist sociologist departs Toronto for her childhood home in central Alberta. In an unorthodox act of research, she designs a museum exhibit that features the work of a local dressmaker. I am the sociologist. My mother, Lorraine, is the dressmaker. The exhibit is a three-dimensional biography of her work featuring wedding dresses that she sewed for family, friends and neighbours. We want to share with you some of the story of how this joint project came to be.

Lorraine: When I was growing up we read the funny papers. That dates me I know. Today, we call them the comics. I remember Tilly the Toiler, Maggie and Jiggs, Ally Oop and Little Orphan Annie. Annie was a little red-haired girl who always wore a red dress. She had a little dog whose name was Sandy. He had big oval eyes and the only thing he ever said was “ARF.” One day Annie was asked where she came from. After a long pause she said, “I just grewed.” Well, Fabrications was like that. It just grewed. In that growing, it has given me the joy of seeing garments that I made—some 50 years ago—on

display not just in Red Deer where we began but across Canada. It has been an adventure.

Kathryn: A big part of our adventure has been exploring the differences in our two women's lives. Mom married young and has dedicated her life to the needs of others: husband, children, grandchildren, aging parents. Where in that life, I often wondered, did she find anything resembling Virginia Woolf's (1929) "room of one's own?"²² Her answer came as a question. "What on earth would I have done," she asked me one day, "without my sewing?"

I never learned to sew. Eager to shed my small town ways, I married young to a man who was on the move; we have no children. I dedicated my life to work, travel and study, becoming the first person in my family to get a Ph.D. It was a strategy that rescued me from living my mother's life. But the process was arduous and alienating. When it was over, I no longer knew who I was in relation to my past. What did it mean that Lorraine's daughter had become Dr. Church? Having reached forty and the end of a postdoctoral fellowship, I turned back to find my mother, to revisit a place and a way of life previously rejected.



Lorraine: From the start, Kathryn has said this is not a story about wedding dresses or weddings. It is a story about women. Probably, the woman who started this story was my grandmother when she taught my mother to sew. My mother in turn taught me. But that is not unusual as one generation taught the next and many articles of clothing were sewn in the home. I took Home Economics in school then in 1947 I enrolled at Vermilion School of Agriculture

and Home Economics. These schools were established to assist farm kids to further their education. Classes started in September after harvest and ended in April before seeding time. When I graduated in 1949, I returned to Grande Prairie in northern Alberta and took a job with the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

As part of my training at Singer I was required to take their sewing lessons. From that point on, I used the Singer method of body measurement for all my sewing — entering the information on the empty pages of my children's used school scribblers. I added a sketch of the garment, a scrap of the fabric, pattern number and size and all alternations needed to make the garment fit. I have been called frugal. I purchased my first sewing machine as soon as I had saved enough money. I still have it, still use it and people are surprised I made all these garments on the same machine.

Kathryn: In May 1996, while visiting my parents, I watched my mother thumb through her sewing scribblers. I knew these booklets very well but for the first time, I really *saw* them. The social scientist in me recognized these rather ragged objects as original data, a priceless case history of skilled domestic sewing. In that moment, the idea of an exhibit sprang into my mind. The next day, while having lunch in the Red Deer Co-op Cafeteria, I spoke to Mom about doing a one-woman show of her work. What I remember of that encounter is her silence, the tiny noise she made in her throat and the way her eyes slid away from mine. "A hair-brained scheme that won't amount to anything." She didn't actually say those words but they hung in the air.

Lorraine: I was on the verge of destroying the scribblers. Who besides me would find them interesting? So I was startled when Kathryn dreamed that she saw the wedding dresses displayed in a large room. "I could see them in a museum," she said. "I'd like to do this. Would you like to be involved?" I instantly saw myself on a pedestal. "No way." I said. "You can't do this to me." Some time later she phoned from Toronto and asked if I had changed my mind. I heard myself saying "Kathryn, if you feel so strongly about this, go ahead." So these old scribblers with the record of years of sewing sparked the formation of this exhibit.

Kathryn: I had never done research that involved material objects. Secretly, I didn't feel very confident about my skills in pulling the exhibit off. But I was sufficiently curious to draft a short description of what I wanted to do and post it on a number of email discussion lists. The response pleased and amazed me as scholars from all over North America urged me forward. Their confidence in the idea helped me to push my mother along. I was also motivated by a strong need to close the gap that time, space and experience had created between her and me. A few weeks later, I called to tell her that the Red Deer Museum had agreed to partner with us. "I must tell you," she confessed, "that when you first told me about this I thought it would never happen. It was beyond my imagination. Maybe I don't consider my sewing as something outstanding that I have done." From that point onwards, my mother has had

to grapple with the public interest in what she has been doing in her basement for almost 50 years.

Lorraine: My first task was to search for “brides” and addresses. There were thirty wedding dresses noted in my books; I made contact with twenty-six of the women who owned them. Some didn’t want their dress on display. One dyed hers and shortened it to wear again. One threw hers away after a difficult divorce. One dress was dry-cleaned and sealed in a box for safe storage and we didn’t think the lady would want to give it to us. But, she said, “A thing of beauty is a thing to share.” This dress just happened to be the last one I made. In the end we had 22 dresses. Kathryn added my mother’s because she said it was part of the story.

In the winter of 1997, Kathryn came home for a month to interview the “brides,” some by phone, some with a visit. Transcripts of those interviews were sent to them for approval before their stories appeared in the exhibit. A lot of time was spent doing everything correctly. She also interviewed me and had her first contact with the Red Deer Museum. They proceeded to find a space for the exhibit.

Before returning to Toronto Kathryn decided to have a coffee party. “Brides” came from Edmonton to Innisfail. Some came with their mothers; some brought their dresses. I couldn’t believe the interest and excitement. The executive director of the museum explained how the dresses would be stored, cared for and insured. I told the women that I had kept their measurements a secret for years and now Kathryn was exposing them to the world. One girl said she wouldn’t mind seeing her measurements from way back then.

Kathryn: I was still at sea about how everything would come together but I trusted the process of the research. Mom was somewhat preoccupied through this time caring for grandchildren. It wasn’t necessarily easy for her to take the time to talk but we did manage several long conversations about her early life and the evolution of her work. I learned much that I had not known but the most compelling part was teaching myself to attend to what she said. As her daughter I tended to tune her out but as a researcher her words were vital to me. Slowly, almost fearfully, my disregard flipped over.

Interviewing Mom’s “brides” quickly revealed the special role that my mother occupied in their lives. Like the sales personnel in bridal stores, she watched them use their dresses to absorb the bridal identity. The important difference was that she wasn’t a paid stranger. She accomplished her task in the context of non-commercial, collaborative and personal relationships. The women of Mom’s community fed her sewing activities with a nineteenth-century desire for special attention and advice with respect to their clothing. In return, she had a way of making them feel right at home—comfortable with their bodies and how they would look in the dress. They had fun together.

The “brides” enthusiasm for my mother, her skill and attentiveness, laid down an emotional trail of crumbs that helped me discover/recover my love for Mom. As I studied her work, I felt surges of pride and identification.

Unexpectedly, I saw myself in Mom's record keeping and in the natural way that she linked garments to women's stories. I saw myself in the trust that she built through careful listening, in her attempts to translate other people's visions into reality, and in corresponding attempts to have her say as a woman with considerable expertise.

Lorraine: Kathryn then returned to Toronto to transcribe and write the dress stories and also the story of my sewing life. She made contact with *Elm Street Magazine* and they published a lovely article about the exhibit, nicely illustrated. It was distributed free with the local papers so the news spread across the country very quickly. Kathryn was also in touch with the program *This Morning* and before we knew it a CBC producer came to Lacombe to tape an interview with me (Church and Church, 1998).

Because the resulting radio documentary focused on our relationship, it stirred a lot of emotion in me. Some people got the impression that Kathryn and I didn't get along when she was growing up. The morning the tape was aired, I listened alone in my kitchen. I couldn't believe the impact my own voice had on me. The production was nicely done. It was clear and her point was well made, but it upset me and though I have listened to it several times, I still have trouble. It wasn't until I had talked to other people about it that I understood our situation wasn't unusual. One woman consoled me by saying: "Any woman who has raised a daughter will know that it involves conflict." It is this particular dimension that has touched people the most. So, we have cried a little but laughed a lot.

Kathryn: Doing the radio documentary was a turning point in our story. After I had networked my way to the executive producer of *This Morning*, I had to call Mom and tell her what I had done. It is interesting that she didn't refuse outright. Perhaps her confidence was growing; perhaps she was just curious. I didn't tell her that going on national radio scared me silly. It has always been my role to be adventurous, to seem certain. Mom and I were interviewed separately. I didn't hold much back and my sense is that she didn't either. She didn't ask me what I had said and I didn't ask her. We both spilled our guts and settled in to wait the outcome.

Well, "settled" is probably the wrong word. Many nights I tossed and turned remembering outrageous bits and pieces of things that I had said, and wondering how they would be used. I suspect Mom did the same. The morning that the documentary finally aired, I listened while the tears ran steadily down my cheeks. What hit me hardest was how clearly and strongly my mother's voice rose to meet my own, this woman who just the previous year was convinced that no one would be interested in her world. Yet here she was telling—and hearing—her story.

Lorraine: The oldest dress in the exhibit is my mother's. Her mother made it for her in 1928. The first wedding dress I made was fifty years old in 2000. I attended the couple's anniversary celebration in Hythe, Alberta. The second and third dresses are 50 this year. One of them is mine. I married young! The

rest of the wedding dresses in the display were made for relatives, friends and Kathryn's school chums. When time came for the dresses to be prepared for display, the museum called me and I spent time helping mend and press and put the dresses on mannequins. This was no easy task.

The mannequins had been used to display a story about nuns of Alberta. They required only shoulders and torso in order to hold the flowing gowns the Sisters wore. But the brides had twenty-four inch waists. A lady spent hours with a heated knife whittling the foam to make a slender waistline. You may be interested to know that the dresses travel on the mannequins. They travel in a special air-conditioned van. Cloth bags were made to slip over them. They are displayed under low lights. People who handle them wear white gloves. In Hull they were displayed behind glass. As someone who has seen and handled the garments so frequently, I find this very curious.

Kathryn: One of my major tasks was to write the various narratives that frame and illuminate the objects in the exhibit—and to generate publicity. I was more successful with this than I hoped. However, the staging of the objects themselves was new to me and I had to rely for that on the expertise of Museum staff. It was a good collaboration but not without tension. For example, when we were still building the exhibit, one of our behind the scenes visitors questioned our use of pastel colors for the text panels suggesting that it was too “Martha Stewart.” Were we not re-feminizing rather than liberating these garments, and by implication, these women?

As my mother's daughter the colors of the text panels were not a problem. As a feminist sociologist I agonized over them. Eventually, after intense discussion, the museum staff and I agreed that we could live with the logic of pastel. Pale mauve, pink, and yellow are the colors Mom worked in, the colors that society offers women to express the feminine. We decided, however, to give them an edge of darkness by doing all of the photos in black and white, and to introduce other design elements that would break the “sweetness and light” of the dresses. I felt good about the changes and about working with local ideas and resources. In keeping with the rich legacy of prairie women, Fabrications is homespun. It reflects Central Alberta, not Toronto. Although that decision split me in two, I was happy at that stage to make room for my small town self. Thus, the exhibit is an act of recuperation, of saying, finally, what is here is good enough.

Lorraine: On opening day in Red Deer the display looked lovely. All the hard work was worthwhile. Three ladies from the museum staff arrived at the official opening wearing their wedding dresses—so you see even though we say wedding dresses are not the story, the idea is still there. At the opening, the museum announced the exhibit would go on tour. I started to worry again. I felt this story was popular because it was local so how would it be accepted in the East? The museum staff assured me the interest is national and they were right. We were welcomed warmly in Ottawa. The text was printed in French and English; the dresses sparkled against the background of bright blue walls.

Kathryn: One of the strongest and most frightening aspects of inventing the exhibit was crossing the line Mom and I each draw between private and public aspects of our lives. We had to imagine ourselves as public people. For Mom the change was more pronounced. Sometimes she seemed to experience the interest that I generated around her as a genuine threat. At one point, she expressed concern at what people would think of her because of the exhibit—as if there was an element of shame in her sudden visibility. “I am,” she said, “the mouse behind the door.” Living the contradiction between this reading of self and the one I was constructing was not easy and she often retreated to the domestic. More than once she exclaimed that it simply could not be her life and work that people found compelling. “You are doing this!” she accused. It was difficult for me to understand why this was a problem—even though I had my own troubles being more visible. So we struggled, alone and together, to make sense of ourselves in the context of our collaboration.

Lorraine: The little town I live in did not pick up on our story very well. We were featured in other newspapers but not in the *Lacombe Globe*, even though they had the necessary information and people working at the paper knew me. Finally, a reporter phoned asking for an interview. She sat in my living room and asked me where the story started. And so I explained how I began to sew as a young mother, isolated with small children and wanting to make contact with other women. The reporter took everything down and went away to write her story. I could hardly wait for the *Globe* to arrive the following Tuesday. When I opened it there I was on the front page. But the first line described me as “a Lacombe woman who once found herself living in a world of loneliness”! Now, that description came as quite a shock. In fact, when I initially told this story I remembered the headline itself as “Local woman lives life of loneliness.” That’s how much impact the description had on me.

At the same time, we have been positively recognized from many different sources: from our member of parliament to the little lady who told me that this display of women’s work meant more to her than an art display where she couldn’t figure out its meaning. We have also had many beautiful cards, letters, phone calls and messages left in the museum. The exhibit has reunited me with people I hadn’t seen for years. And it has had a wonderful effect on my family. We are all closer together.

Kathryn: As I watched my mother change, I recognized the many changes that I lived through in the course of fifteen years of post-secondary education. University gave me new ways of being in and interpreting the world that, on my side at least, ruptured and displaced my relationship with my mother. These class-based separations remain but I know now that they are more structural than personal. Working on Fabrications has helped me to both identify and bridge them. It has been a rich and satisfying way to pay attention to my mother’s life—and by extension the lives of other women who have been deeply engaged in skilled domestic labor.

I relate to my mother differently now than I did when we first started. I

consciously take pleasure in her creativity, revealed so clearly in the luminosity of the wedding dresses. I have a sense of our common creativity and sensuality that strengthens me. Collaborating on the exhibit has taught me my mother's legitimacy—a piece of my emotional life that had been missing. Politically, it has been very satisfying to bring forward the story of an (extra)ordinary woman, and an invisible social history.

Commentary

To fully appreciate this dialogue, it is important to understand how it came to be. Until her engagement with Fabrications, Lorraine had no experience as a public speaker and no confidence that she had anything significant to say. She made her first speech to the crowd that gathered to mark the inaugural exhibit opening. I am certain she hoped that it would be her last. However, about a year later, when the exhibit was in Calgary, the Glenbow Museum staff asked Lorraine whether she would speak to the mostly-seniors audience who attended a program called "Terrific Tuesdays." What could she say? With me in Toronto, too far away to do the "gig," she was the only choice.

So, she sat at the kitchen table—that taken-for-granted focal point of nurturing where home-cooked meals were consumed and homemade dresses were constructed—and with pencil and paper she took up the unfamiliar work of writing. It was not easy but, leaning on my father's advice to just tell her own story, she eventually produced something she liked. It was a good speech: informative, amusing and delivered with an assurance that startled Margaret, her daughter-in-law (and driver) who stood listening and watching in the wings.

When that event was over, I asked Lorraine to send me her notes. I typed her words into a computer file, initially just to give her hard copy for her scrapbook, but later to play with/against as I wrote about our collaboration (Church 2001a). Something new and exciting emerged as I spliced our accounts together, something I wanted to share with our Fabrications visitors. Quite naturally—but holding hands for courage—we turned to performance.

It was here that Lorraine most surprised me, for she took to the stage with amazing presence—particularly with a responsive audience. The high point for us was at the Museum for Textiles in Toronto where the auditorium was full of my friends and colleagues. The small space filled quickly. It overflowed. It buzzed with rich anticipation. I introduced the talk then paused for her opening segment. "When I was a little girl we read the funny papers," she began, and was met by a warm wave of laughter. From that moment they were with her and she expanded into their approval, delivering her lines like a stand up comic.

At one point, I looked down at my copy of our script in confusion. She was not sticking to the prepared text! Instead, she was making jokes about herself and about me that just came to her in the moment. I rolled my eyes at the audience, pointed to my notes and shrugged helplessly: daughter as straight woman! Similarly, in St. Catharines, she drew a piece of hand-written text out of her pocket and, with a wicked grin, read out a whole new story. I loved the

playfulness of these incidents and the joy she took in positioning me as a stodgy stick-to-the-page academic.

I entered Lorraine's interventions into the evolving text. It improved. And our delivery improved with each outing. We gained a sense of timing and relaxed our pace. The wonder of it has never left me, watching and feeling this 1950s housewife move from silence to speech, from the background to the podium, from invisibility to vibrant and humorous visibility. In the course of introducing Fabrications to visitors across the country, Lorraine stitched herself a whole new persona.

¹The sites were: Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Nova Scotia Museum of Industry in Stellarton, Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto, St. Catharines Museum and Thunder Bay Art Gallery.

²⁴"All I could do," Woolf wrote, "was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (pgs. 7-8).

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