

Fit for a Hero

Organization gives wedding gowns to military and first responders.

by Amanda Rider

Planning a wedding can be a daunting task—and that rings true no matter what tribulations you may have conquered in the past. Just ask Roseann Sdoia Matera.

On April 15, 2013, Roseann was one of the more than 260 people injured in the Boston Marathon bombing while waiting for a friend to cross the finish line. After the first bomb exploded, Roseann decided to run. She took only a couple of steps before seeing two flashes of light at her feet—the second bomb.

“I didn’t know exactly what it was, but my brain knew it was bad,” she says.

Roseann blacked out for a moment, and when she awoke, she was sitting on the ground with her left leg stretched in front of her and her right leg tucked underneath her. “I didn’t see what happened to my right leg, and that’s for the best,” she says.

Roseann’s right leg had to be amputated above the knee, but she remains grateful for the help she received from multiple people at the scene, including Mike Matera—a firefighter who stuck by her side as she was transported to the hospital.

“I came out of sedation, and my mom was already talking about how cute the firefighter was,” Roseann says. “I was like, ‘Are you kidding me? I can’t even think of this right now.’”

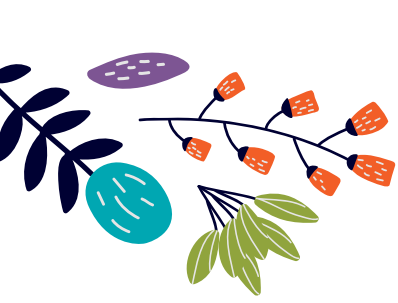
Mike continued to visit the hospital, and soon those visits turned into trips to Roseann’s prosthetist appointments, which evolved into lunch outings. “I think we both realized that we were someone the other one was looking for,” Roseann says.

In December 2016, the pair became engaged, ushering in a fresh batch of challenges. “Planning a wedding is overwhelming, no matter what you’ve been through,” Roseann says.

ROSEANN AND
MIKE MATERA.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SHAWN BLACK PHOTOGRAPHY



Joining Forces

Luckily, there's an organization—Brides Across America (BAA)—designed to ease the burden by gifting free wedding gowns to couples in which the bride or groom serves either as a first responder or in the military.

Founder Heidi Janson came up with the idea in 2008 after reading an article about a soldier in Afghanistan who felt forgotten overseas. "We're so lucky over here," Heidi says. "I realized I do forget about who is overseas fighting for our freedoms on a day-to-day basis."

And so she did something about it. As the owner of Tulle Bridal in Andover, Massachusetts, Heidi hosted a gown giveaway event for military couples over the Fourth of July holiday, gifting 60 gowns during the two-day event. Many of the brides' husbands were serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, while some had babies their spouses had never met.

"A lot of times the girls don't have the financial means to afford a dress," Heidi says.

Word spread quickly, and today, BAA has given away over 25,000 dresses, partnering with some 100 bridal shops across the country to host similar giveaway events throughout the year. Designers, bridal salons and individuals donate the dresses. "This is one part of their wedding planning where they can have complete financial relief," Heidi says.

That relief is particularly helpful when you consider the challenges military couples face: Injuries and last-minute deployments can force them to move up their wedding before they've had much time to save money.

In 2017, BAA expanded to include first responder couples, like Roseann and Mike. "First responders are in harm's way on our own soil here," Heidi says.

That meant Roseann—who was seeking a dress that would hide her prosthesis—didn't have to explain her



situation to countless bridal salons. "Brides Across America took that pressure off," she says.

Spreading the Love

On Oct. 21, 2017, Roseann and Mike wed at a laid-back restaurant on Cape Cod.

While the past five years have brought their fair share of struggles, Roseann manages to stay positive. "There are certain things in this world you can't change—I couldn't change losing my leg," she says. "But there are people and organizations willing to help in any situation, like Brides Across America."

The nonprofit lists upcoming gown giveaway events on bridesacrossamerica.com, and for recent brides who want to help out, donating your wedding dress to BAA is one way to give back.

"If we make a difference in one person's life, that's all it really needs to be," Heidi says. "And they'll remember it for a lifetime."



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PHOTOGRAPHS: ©CATHERINE BULIGH/GREEN BARN PHOTOGRAPHY
ABOVE LEFT: EACH YEAR, BAA GIVES AWAY ABOUT 2,000 DRESSES. RIGHT: FOR HEIDI JANSON, BAA IS ABOUT MAKING DREAMS COME TRUE.

"Love allows you to really see another person, holistically, with care, concern, and compassion."

Love 2.0 by Barbara L. Fredrickson, Ph.D.