

INSIDE

THE

LIFE OF A

Dressmaker

By
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Inside the Life of a Dressmaker

Many decades ago during the year of 1962, my grandmother Ina Louise Brown worked as a dressmaker at Brooks Garment Factory in Kingston, Jamaica. During this period, Jamaica was ruled by the British government; therefore, Jamaica's monetary system consisted of pounds, shillings, pence, etc. Because of Jamaica's lack of technological advances, being a dressmaker required a lot of hard work, time, and patience. The workers within the factory got paid according to the amount of clothing they made for that week, and at the end of the week they would receive their pay check. The workers had to work eight hours a day, from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon.

As a child, Ina would sit and watch her mother sew dresses, shirts, pants, and other garments. Later on, Ina gradually started making clothes for her dolls from scratch. As Ina grew older she came to realize that dressmaking was sometime that she was born to do. "At one point in my life I thought of becoming a nurse, but then I came to realize that I couldn't stand the sight of blood, so I stuck with my first love, dressmaking," said Ina. After high school Ina received training from a dressmaker named Elma Robinson. Elma taught Ina how to use a sewing machine and how to cut styles from fabrics.

As an adult, Ina began to sew clothes for her family, friends, and children. Months later, Ina found an ad in the local newspaper regarding wanted dressmakers. She applied for the job with the hope that she would find the career of her dreams. Within a

couple of weeks Ina was notified for an interview. "When I went for the interview I met a woman named Joyce in the waiting room. We laughed and we talked until it was her turn to go in for her interview. When she was finished with her interview she told me that they said they would notify her if she got the job," said Ina.

Then, it was Ina's turn to go in for her interview. The supervisor asked her many questions, such as, "Do you have any experience?" and "Who made the dress you were wearing?" "I told the supervisor that I made the dress myself, and she was so impressed that she gave me a sewing machine to test my skills and my knowledge of sewing," said Ina. First, she had to sew a zipper into a pair of jeans. Then, she had to sew large pieces of fabric together. "I did so well on the interview that the supervisor gave me a choice on whether or not I wanted to work that same day or on another day," said Ina.

Ina decided to start working right away. After she was finished working she saw Joyce waiting for her in the waiting room. "She asked me what took me so long, and I knew that I couldn't tell her that I was working the whole time. Instead, I told her they would notify me, if I got the job or not," said Ina. Ina was so happy once she got the job, and everyone at home was so astonished to find out that she received the job the same time she went for the interview. After working a couple of weeks on the job, Ina became very acquainted with her co-workers and her manager Wendy Song.

"While working at this job I came to realize that you had to have knowledge in knowing how to sew, you had to have skills in being neat and doing a good job, and you also had to have the ability to work as accurately as you could within the certain amount of time that you had," said Ina. Ina's starting salary was four pounds a week depending on the amount of clothing she made. Being a dressmaker involves

difficult and easy tasks, but for Ina the hardest part of her job was to cut styles from fabric, and the easiest part of her job was to sew the pieces of fabric together. Another challenging task was the fact that there weren't any electric sewing machines at the time, so as a result the workers had to use their feet to peddle in order to generate the machine. As the years went by Jamaica's technology became more advanced and brought many benefits towards being a dressmaker.

Ina was the first person on the job to receive the new brand of electric sewing machines. "Things have changed so much," said Ina. "Thanks to the new brand of electric sewing machines, I was able to get more work done in a faster and much easier way." Ina cherished each and every moment she experienced on the job. "A very interesting person that I worked with on the job was a man named Eddie, he always had a joke to tell and made me laugh a lot on the job," said Ina.

Ina was very passionate about her job and loved to see people wear her designs. "When I see someone wearing my creations it makes me feel proud of myself, and it lifts up my spirits and encourages me to make more designs," said Ina. The materials that were used in order for the workers to make their lovely creations were a sewing machine, scissors, thread, needles, pins, fabric, etc. "One of my favorite designs would have to be a two-piece dress, it was a combination that included a jacket and skirt," said Ina. Ina worked very hard and put her best efforts toward her job.

Many years later during the late 1960s, Jamaica received its independence and the currency converted to dollars and cents. Ina was able to make four hundred dollars a week on the job. "I was so proud of myself at the time because, I was on my own, and I took such good care of my family and the bills. As the years went by I became

more and more successful on the job,” said Ina. While working at this job Ina knew that she had to maintain a balance between her job, her family, and her friends.

Ina’s daily routine was full of various hectic activities, such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids, and getting to work on time. “I’ve had some very busy days in my life, but my work days have got to be the busiest,” said Ina with a smile. Ina would usually wake up at five or six in the morning. Next, she would make breakfast and get the kids ready for school on time. Then, she would get herself ready for work and wait at the bus stop to go to work.

She would wait fifteen to twenty minutes for the bus to arrive. She lived a half-hour away from work, so she would usually arrive just in time to start working. While working at this job Ina had a choice on whether or not she wanted to work on the weekends or over the holidays. “Once in a while I would work overtime, but not too often because I wanted to be with my kids. On some Saturdays that I worked overtime, I hired a babysitter to take care of my kids while I was at work,” said Ina.

Ina was able to get more for her money, because of her great budgeting habits. “One of the greatest things that I did with my money was to save most of it so I could buy my very own sewing machine, in order for me to work at home,” said Ina. People would always give Ina complements on her clothing and they would usually ask her where she bought them from, and she would simply reply that she made it herself. Ina was also a very generous person by sharing her sewing skills with her children. As her children grew older it became a very useful part of their everyday lives, and it was also something that they could fall back on for their survival skills.

“I felt very proud of myself knowing that I accomplished another goal, teaching my kids a skill of their own,” said Ina. An old saying goes “all good things have to come to an end,” fortunately for Ina it was just the beginning. “I worked at this job for fifteen years until the factory went out of business. Everyone always got along with one another. We were like one big happy family,” said Ina with a smile.

After the factory went out of business, Ina continued to do dressmaking by starting her own business. The name of her business was called *Ina's Dressmaking Center*. “I started my own independent business at home, where I would sew custom made clothing,” said Ina. Because telephones weren't around in the area that Ina was living in, she had to hang flyers up to advertise her business. Ina had a huge business going for her and she had lots of customers.

Ina's designs were beautiful and chic, plus they were unforgettable, which attracted even more customers to her business. “I started working early in the morning and finished late in the evening,” said Ina. “It was a very challenging time in my life, but I had a good time doing what I do best,” said Ina. “When I make clothes for my customers I make sure that it fits their style, shape, and personality.” Being a dressmaker could sometimes be a little overwhelming, but according to Ina it was the best time of her life.

Ina's advice to people is to never give up and to follow your dreams to wherever it takes you. “I wouldn't change a thing in my life if I had to relive it all over again, because I'm so pleased and thankful for everything that I have done, after all the sky's the limit to what you can do,” said Ina.

With special thanks to Ina Brown for her time and patience. This interview took place on January 2, 2007. I am Shanice Lumley and this was the way we worked.