Debutantes

‘Queen for a month,’ but keeping it in perspective

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Linda Lee pulled in her tummy and straightened her back as she watched the seamstress tighten the waistline of her daughter Joan’s debutante gown. With the ball only a week away, Linda was beginning to feel the stress and excitement of her daughter’s debut at the Baton Rouge Symphony League’s Nutcracker Christmas Ball.

Joan is one of the 14 senior members of Les Jeunes Amies (Young Friends), a volunteer organization for the Baton Rouge Symphony. After doing service work for the symphony during high school, the seniors are recognized at the fund-raiser as debutantes.

Linda struggled to raise her daughter alone since her divorce when Joan was 5. Even though Joan and her father lived apart, they maintained a close relationship until he died two years ago. Linda joined the Symphony League so that Joan could join Les Jeunes Amies, “because it was something we could do together.”

Linda was excited about Joan’s debut, but wasn’t sure her daughter shared that excitement. Joan admitted she was doing it as much for her mother as for herself, but cherished the time the two spent together to make it happen.

“I figured it was something I’d be glad I did when I get older,” Joan said.

Cost became the biggest barrier for the Lees. No family of a debutante spent less than $2,000. One of the members of Les Jeunes Amies dropped out her senior year partly because of the expense.

A chunk of the Lees’ money went into the dress. Joan chose a Cinderella-like Victorian ball gown with a fitted bodice, puffy sleeves...
and a full skirt. She wore a padded bra. "Boobs for a day," Joan joked. Joan was used to wearing loose-fitting clothes and wondered how she would make it through the night wearing at least 21 yards of heavy faille material and crinoline.

"I won't have to breathe that night," she joked as she stiffly moved around the seamstress' studio. "How will I sit down?" She practiced by falling back into a chair, exposing the yards of netting underneath her skirt.

A white gown, often a modified wedding dress, is the formal uniform for the debutantes, and can cost from $500 to $750. Because the style of the debutante gown follows a tradition of guidelines, the problem for the girls is finding a dress that will conform, while at the same time stand out. Kristi Ashton, president of Les Jeunes Amies, kept track of the dress each girl would be wearing so no two girls would be wearing the same dress.

Natalie Elkin and her mother Martha took two months to find a dress. They love to shop together, and "went together every time," said Natalie.

Melanie Mitchum and her mother Linda drove to Dallas and found nothing. They eventually bought a dress that perfectly met Melanie's four guidelines: A sweetheart neckline, simple but elegant, a big bow, and conservative.

At the mother-daughter tea — a social gathering before the ball — the girls talked about their dresses with a touch of competitive curiosity. Melanie Mitchum explained, "It sounds kind of selfish, but I was hoping no one would have a real standout dress," one that would overpower the rest of the dresses. Mitchum said she didn't want her boyfriend "eating another girl or something."

Two nights before the ball, the debutantes met with their fathers to practice presentations. Joan Lee asked her godfather, Jim Rogers, to escort her. Most of the girls brought their white satin shoes to the rehearsal so they could practice walking in high heels. Joan Coles, an expert in etiquette, instructed the girls on curtsying properly, maintaining a consistent smile (Vaseline on the teeth), walking gracefully with an escort, and holding the long-stemmed rose correctly.

The curtsy posed the biggest challenge. After Coles demonstrated the perfect curtsy, the debs broke up into groups to practice. Knees cracked as they stooped into the unnatural position. Some fell, pulling their hair.

At left, Michelle Lyon loses her balance while practicing her curtsy and pulls her father, Sherman Lyon, down with her at rehearsal the Thursday before the ball. Sherman later teased Michelle that he would let go of her when she curtsied at the ball so she'd fall down. Below, directing the rehearsal is Joan Coles, left, a local etiquette expert, and Agnes Harrop, a Symphony League member who helped organize the ball. Cole has volunteered for years to coach the Symphony debutantes in the art of curtsying, walking and smiling properly during their introduction.

Left, some of the girls and their fathers become tired as the rehearsal stretches into its second hour. From left are Sam Mitchum, Melanie Mitchum, Ashley Ragusa, and Dr. John Ragusa.
thers down with them, bursting into laughter at their own clumsiness.

Michelle Lyon, a debutante who is never accused of being demure, was surprised at how rigorously they were trained for their debut. “It kind of scares me how serious some people take it,” she said.

Many of the girls became nervous. The prospect of being on stage in front of hundreds of people suddenly turned an everyday occurrence — like walking up stairs — into a momentous task.

Kristi Ashton and father Jack Ashton Jr. faced a larger challenge. Jack is legally blind, suffering from a disease that narrowed his sight to tunnel vision. So while everyone still worked on the curtsy, Kristi and Jack were developing hand signals that would direct them on their path down the runway.

“One squeeze (on the hand) to turn, and two to stop,” explained Kristi.

On the day of the ball, Dec. 14, Joan Lee arrived at the beauty shop at 12:30 p.m. She was scheduled for a makeover, manicure, and a hairstyling. She arrived in her favorite clothes: cut-off shorts and an oversized Oxford shirt. Her hair was pulled back haphazardly. Her stylist, Robert Allen,
Top, far left, Melanie Mitchum, left, avoids wrinkling her skirt by laying her skirt over the back of her chair. Mireille Lyon kicks off her shoes and reclines in her chair while the debutantes wait in the dressing room before being presented. Below, far left, Xanthe Wellington then her hair as she waits in a hallway beside the ballroom with the rest of the debutantes and their escorts before being introduced. Left, Joan Lyon, centre and Linda away from the bust to talk about how much she wishes her father were with them. Below, mothers of the debutantes line up to photograph their daughters. From left are Linda Mitchum, Carol Kirtley, and Eudora McNair.

Reality is set in when the girls saw each other in the absolute gowns. Excitedly, they primped for the photo session. Everyone complimented each other. Mothers included. Dresses and hairstyles were the focus of conversation. Once the photos were finished, the girls were shuffled into the dressing rooms upstairs where they waited for two hours until the ceremony. Like the wedding tradition, the debutantes cannot be seen by the guests until they are introduced.

The wait seemed to drag on forever. The anxious debbies began to feel cramped. Mums would come up occasionally to fuss over their daughters, and fix their makeup. Some of the girls went into the bathroom to smoke cigarettes. Conversation turned to the upcoming Guns N' Roses concert.

At last, it was time for the young women to go downstairs where they would wait backstage. The debutantes were going over the hand signals. Natalie Elkin kept peeking outside to see her friends and family. Sherman Lyon teased his daughter Michelle about setting go of her hand when she curtsied so she'd fall. Michelle, however, remained unconcerned and joked about her debut being "the zenith of my life.

"Joan Catherine Lee," announced the master of ceremonies, which was her cue to step onto stage into the spotlight. The announcer continued her biography: "Joan is escorted by her godfather, Jim
Rogers. She attends St. Joseph’s Academy where she has maintained a 3.0 grade-point average . . .

Linda, sitting at the table directly in front of the runway, held her breath while tears filled her eyes. Watching her daughter on stage, Linda wondered if her daughter was tough enough to make it through life’s struggles.

“I wondered if I had done too much for her and not made her do enough on her own.”

Each mother appeared overwhelmed with pride and emotion as her daughter walked up the runway. Karen Ashton was awestruck by the sight of her daughter Kristi on stage. She started to cry.

“I was thinking of the day she was born, and I got really mushy.” Linda Mitchum also cried when her daughter was introduced. “I couldn’t believe she was grown up.”

Up on stage, most of the girls’ energy was devoted to avoiding stumbling. Aside from the concentration, they were able to enjoy their moment in the spotlight. Melanie Mitchum, who is usually reserved, enjoyed the experience: “I liked having all eyes on me for a good minute or two.”

While no girl wanted to be uptaged by another, Kristi Ashton said that “Every girl wanted it to be her night.” However, she admitted: “I like to be the center of attention.”

Belinda Sanchez, Kristi's neighbor and guest at the ball, obliged by telling her that she was the best and the prettiest debutante.

In fact, according to Kristi’s guests, it was unanimous: Kristi was the prettiest. Of course, at the Kothe table, Kristen Kothe was the prettiest, while at the Elkin table, Natalie received all the votes.

Joan’s experience differed from the others because she missed her father. After her debut, Joan took her mother away from the party to talk about her sadness. It was Linda’s turn to help her daughter. “Your daddy would be so proud,” she told Joan. “I wish he was here, too.”

Top, Joan Lee and her godfather, Jim Rogers, take the walk in the spotlight as Joan is presented to society. Right, Barry Switzer carries Kristi Ashton’s shoes as they dance at the ball.