

Apron's popularity tied to memories

By John Tanasychuk
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SEVEN YEARS AGO, EllynAnne Geisel bought her first apron.

"Up until 1999," she says, "I just wiped my hands on my clothes like everyone else." But with her youngest child off to college, the full-time homemaker decided to pursue her long-delayed writing career. Her first story would be about aprons -- "the piece of clothing that symbolized what I'd done for 24 years of my life."

Geisel was ironing an apron she'd found at a thrift store when "this surge of something" flew out of the garment.

"I replicated her activities," says Geisel, 58, of the women she imagined wore the apron. "She used to wash this apron. She used to iron it. I wondered what her best recipes were. I wondered if she had problems raising children. I wondered what she did in her spare time. I wondered what books she read. She is, in a sense, woven into this fabric."

Geisel now has more than 400 aprons and almost as many apron stories collected over the years from interviews conducted across the country.

Her new book, "The Apron Book: Making, Wearing, and Sharing a Bit of Cloth and Comfort" (Andrews McMeel, \$16.95), includes many of those stories, plus apron history and patterns for making your own.

She celebrates apron wearers in "Apron Chronicles: A Patchwork of American Recollections," a traveling exhibit managed by the Women's Museum of Dallas, a Smithsonian affiliate.

Geisel also sews and sells aprons from her Web site, www.apronmemories.com. Two of them were worn by Bree, the character played by Marcia Cross on "Desperate Housewives."

While Geisel refers often to "my apron journey," it appears that many more people are onboard. Judy Florence has published two books that focus on apron collecting and conservation, "Gingham Aprons of the '40s & '50s: A Checkered Past" and "Aprons of the Mid-20th Century: To Serve and Protect." Joyce Cheney's "Aprons: A Celebration" features photos of her personal collection.

Nashville designer Elizabeth Scokin's Glam It Up line of new aprons includes a \$300 dry-clean-only satin creation. Anthropologie stores carry chic aprons with names like the Ethel, and Deviled Egg Halter. And at Jezebel, a funky Fort Lauderdale, Fla., boutique, vintage aprons start at \$28.

That aprons are a historical link to women of previous generations became clear when Geisel first started showing her growing collection.

"The aprons were memory-triggers, but the stories were about much more than fabric," she says. "They were about life. They were about people whose sole job was creating this cocoon of security and warmth for her family."

Aprons have now taken over her life, not to mention her home in Pueblo, Colo. "Since the kids flew the coop, their closets are full. Each apron is on its own hanger. I also have rolling racks. They have to be on racks because when I go away, I need to make sure that the representation is going to be varied enough. I don't want people to miss out connecting."

When she visits her exhibition, she watches "strangers talking to strangers" who feel the need to tell their own apron stories. Geisel has become a kind of apron-keeper receiving boxes of them in the mail for eternal safekeeping.

"It's a way for their aprons, and the person whose memory is woven into the fabric, to be seen by others," she says. "They get to travel. Mother never went anywhere."

Geisel thinks she knows why aprons are suddenly back: "I look at it this way," she says. "I think these are times that are calling to women to reconnect with the homemaker gene that I think resides in all of us. By that I don't mean that everyone all of a sudden wants to stay home and raise children. By that I mean everyone is trying to create an oasis from the chaos that has become our daily lives.

"The Apron Book: Making, Wearing and Sharing a Bit of Cloth and Comfort"

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