

## **Changing Habits – A Time of Transition**

Interview with Alberta Weisberg, Co-Designer of the first Modified Habit

Interviewed by: Lena Pennino-Smith, Co-Director of Communications at the  
Motherhouse in Amityville, NY

When Alberta Weisberg agreed to help sew a dress, she didn't realize she would be stitching the prototype of the modified habit that would be worn by thousands of Dominican Sisters!

In the late 1960s, it was decided that Sisters could experiment with new designs for the Dominican habit, departing from the beautiful -- yet cumbersome black and white robes. With excitement, Dominican sisters gathered patterns, designing their own dresses to share with the Congregation.

Various convents would host events, playfully called "fashion shows", to model their designs for other sisters to see.

Alberta Weisberg was approached by a sister she remembers as "Allison Marie" who taught her children in sixth and eighth grade, she said. Alberta was very active in her children's school, St. Agnes Cathedral School in Rockville Centre, especially in the Mother's Club. She had already helped Sister Allison with projects such as making veils for first Communicants in a third-world country on her Singer Sewing machine. "I had a sewing room in my house," she said. "I used to work on the veils at two in the morning for a few hours. I had it down to a science...I made hundreds of veils until I had to stop! Sister Allison said, 'That's enough Alberta!'"

When Sister Allison asked her to make a modified habit, it was just another sewing project to Alberta.

"I wasn't a professional seamstress but when someone asked me to do something, I never refused anything," said Alberta. "My husband Warren used to say that 'The word no is not in Alberta's dictionary'...I had a reputation for being willing to do most anything that was asked of me."

Sister Allison arrived at Alberta's home with another sister, because in that time sisters always traveled in pairs. The women laid everything on the sewing table. "Sister Allison brought in a few patterns and chose a piece of this one and a

piece of that one. She designed it,” said Alberta. Alberta sewed it! It took about two weeks to make.

Alberta still remembers the final product which was made from a bolt of washable wool. “It was a basic A-line dress with a smock (called a scapular) that came down over the head to blot out the figure. It had long sleeves and hung one inch below the knee. The headpiece had a crown of buckram (stiff cloth) and a piece of veiling that covered the head.”

Alberta’s daughter Barbara Schmidt was there when the sisters -- usually dressed in the long habit which only showed their faces -- tried on the new modified habit. “I remember vividly realizing: They have legs... It was shocking to see it!”

After the dress was shown to the Sisters at various convents it was decided that their dress was the winner!

The duo was surprised. “Neither of us thought we had a chance of winning and when we did, it was a total shock,” said Alberta. “There were other women who were professional sewers!”

It was Alberta’s pleasure to help the sisters. “I am very partial to nuns,” confessed Alberta.

Alberta recalled the kindness of the Sisters of St. Joseph who taught her as a child at St. Mary Star of the Sea in Far Rockaway. “I cried about not having a Communion dress,” she said, noting her family did not have enough money for one. She was supposed to wear her cousin’s old dress, but it was huge on her! “I was very tiny, always first in line for my class...My cousin was always last in line...My mother kept saying, ‘I’ll fix it, I’ll fix it!’ But Sister surprised me with a Communion dress. It was such a beautiful taffeta dress with a lovely veil.”

Years later, little did Alberta know, she would pay the favor forward by creating the modified habit worn by so many of our Dominican Sisters. Thank you, Alberta!