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Hat maker's dilemma: Which one for holiday?

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

"In your Easter bonnet" is more than a song lyric to Agnes DeVeaux Nairn; it's a dilemma. As she prepares for Easter Sunday worship at Mount Sinai Missionary Baptist Church in Liberty City, she must choose one hat from her huge collection.

Over the years, DeVeaux Nairn has made herself nearly 100 of them. Some are straight out of a steamy turn-of-the-last-century love story. Others are delicate enough to grace a Christmas window at Bergdorf's. Still others are sheer bling.

"Almost everybody likes this one," she says pointing to a pastel delicacy. "People say it looks like ice cream."

There are winter hats and summer hats. Feathered hats, beaded ones and bowed ones. (She confesses to a special weakness for bows.) There are a few tiny hats, but most have wide brims. All of them reflect her extravagant sense of style and color.

"I always loved beautiful things," she says. "But affording them -- well that was something else."

In a way, it was beauty that saved DeVeaux Nairn in her early years. She was newly wed and recently graduated from nursing school when she moved from Columbia, S.C., to Miami in 1958. She had no family here, and was coming to the sad realization that the man who had wooed and uprooted her was not the man she had married.

She remembers walking into "one of the loveliest shops in our side of town. It was called Lory's and it was located on Seventh Avenue and 62nd Street. DeeDee Lawrence was the manager, and she told me I was a pretty girl. I'm not sure anybody had told me that before."

Lory's had several stores in Miami's black neighborhoods, but their fashion shows had yet to feature black models. DeVeaux Nairn would be among the first. Modeling assignments for Lily Rubin soon followed.

"Our possibilities in Miami back then were limited, of course. Our fashion shows were only for the black community. But these stores also were represented in the Caribbean. Off we'd go on the weekends to the hotels in the Bahamas. There the shows could be integrated."

ENTERED NURSING

Much as she loved the work, DeVeaux Nairn was by then a single mother with a small son to support who needed a reliable day job. She became a nurse in a doctor's office, continued modeling on the side, and eventually bought her own home.

She retired from nursing after more than 30 years and modeling well before that, but found an outlet

for her fashion sense in hat making.

Each hat has a suit, a purse, stockings, gloves and a lace handkerchief to match. And each has a story. One is trimmed with the buttons from a gown from her modeling days. Another was spray-painted -- there simply was no other way to find that shade of aquamarine -- and decorated with remnants of a sequined dress from a Goodwill shop.

"What is so unexpected, what I love, is that my hats get more and more risqué as I get older," says DeVeaux Nairn, 72. "Maybe I'm understanding more and more about the Gospels."

'SENIOR SAINT'

She is a "senior saint," as the elders are called, at Mount Sinai, where she has been head of missionary outreach and a choir stalwart.

"Maybe the hats began even before the modeling," she says. "Maybe it all began with the singing."

In her youth, DeVeaux Nairn's soprano voice was so resplendent that "the Baptists gave me a scholarship to nursing school provided that I sing in their choir. They did that even though I was an Episcopalian.

"... Even though the Baptists' services are a lot busier than those of any Episcopalians, I've honored the Baptists from that moment on."

Her hats don't delight everyone, DeVeaux Nairn says, but she holds her head high. "I know some members of my church think I'm a strutting fool. Some people say my hats are too big, they can't see past them to the reverend, and so I should sit off in the back in a corner by myself.

"I think the problem is that this structure was built as a church for white folks. Most churches these days are built on a slope so that people can see the preacher no matter the hat anybody wears."