

BRINGING BLISS
"Seeing their joy is priceless," says Janson (left) her salon in Georgetown, Mass.).



People FIRST
HELP AMERICA'S VETERANS

MAKING WEDDING DREAMS COME TRUE

Bridal salon owner Heidi Janson has given away more than 10,000 gowns to military brides—and found a new purpose in life

U.S. Air Force Capt. Kim French sat in her sweat-soaked uniform in a dusty pickup truck in Afghanistan last summer and fantasized about a wedding dress—emphasizing on the fantasy. She and her fiancé, Marine Capt. Bo Biddle, were on a tight budget, while he would look sharp in his dress blues, she couldn't afford a gown that would make her feel special. "It was a hard year," French (now Biddle), 30, says of her third deployment. "Finances were tough, and I was so worried."

Enter modern-day fairy godmother Heidi Janson, a bridal salon owner in Georgetown, Mass. In just five years Janson's Brides Across America non-profit (BridesAcrossAmerica.com) has given away more than 10,000 gowns to brides who are in the military or marrying military grooms. Mobilizing 60 salons in 28 states to donate new, unsold gowns, inviting individuals to offer up gently used dresses and raising funds through corporate sponsors for gowns, veils and shoes, Janson wants couples who sacrifice for their country to have a perfect day. "To help them fulfill a dream is a great thing," says the fashionably affired 48-year-old



KIM & BO BIDDLE
They met through an online dating service and he proposed on Valentine's Day. For the new Mrs. Biddle, who works at the Pentagon when not deployed, her glamorous gown was a welcome change after "a hellacious climate and wearing a nasty, grungy uniform," she says. "For once, I felt like a bride." Bo noticed, "It was the perfect wedding gown for her," he says. "She was beautiful."

Photograph by BEN HOFFMANN

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—HEIDI JANSON

mom of two. "It's a Cinderella moment," Janson had her own life-changing moment in April 2008 when she read a story about a Navy SEAL's day in the war zone. "I thought," she says, "How lucky are we to live so comfortably when every day our troops put themselves in harm's way?" "Thinking of the excess inventory she had, she reached out to five other salon owners, organized a two-day dress giveaway and handed out 50 gowns. "Our first bride carried an American flag and picture of her military fiancé," Janson recalls. "I thought, 'This is what I want to do in life.'"

She's the perfect woman for the job. Growing up as the daughter of a bridal salon owner in Salem, N.H., she went to work for her mom after college and went into business for herself in 1987. She also understands sacrifice: Divorced, she's spent countless hours in hospitals and researching medical literature for her children Brianna, 20, and Christian, 16, each of whom has battled chronic medical conditions. Drawing no salary from her nonprofit, where she has four part-time volunteers, she supports her family through her salon, Tuttle Bridal, and works part-time as a sales director for a couture bridal company. "Running Brides Across America," she says, "gives me the strength to go on."

So does the heartfelt gratitude of overjoyed brides. Kim Biddle, who heard about Janson's dress giveaway on the Internet, tied the knot in a May 18 beach wedding in Virginia Beach, Va., in a "very fitted, sexy, bling" A-line halter gown that normally sells for \$600. "Brides Across America made my wedding dreams a reality," says Biddle, who came back from Afghanistan in September 2012. "I felt more beautiful than I have ever felt. I cried when we said our vows. Then we danced in the rain. It was perfect."

By Alicia Dennis with reporting by Anne Lang



ALLISON & JACOB CLAYTON
Allison (with Marine Capt. Jacob Clayton) at their 2012 nuptials in Lemon wore a hand-sewn gown made in Italy. "I felt like a million dollars," she says. "Heidi is an angel."



MEGAN & TOM CORRELL
The strapless gown Megan (with Army Capt. Tom Correll) at their 2012 ceremony in Downers Grove, Ill., wore sold for \$1,150. "Something I could never afford," she says. "I get choked up thinking about it. It's an incredible thing Heidi's doing for military brides."



ALLISON & ALEX RAMOS
"We saved up to afford the wedding, and to wear the gorgeous dress made the day complete," says Allison (with Marine Sgt. Ramon Ramos) at their 2011 nuptials in Springtown, Texas. "I'm so grateful."

HELP A BRIDE!

1. **Donate a dress.** Give your gently used gown to a military bride in need.
2. **Contribute.** Give \$25 to buy a bride shoes; \$50 for a veil; \$100 for a tulle train; \$500 for a gown.
3. **Get involved.** Become a participating Brides Across America salon. Go to bridesacrossamerica.com and follow the **PeopleFirst** button.