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Jennifer Roberge, founder of Girlfriend In Your Closet, helps Pati Mari decide what clothes in her wardrobe look best on her.



CAROL LORLAS

Don't fret. All you need is a 'Girlfriend In Your Closet'



Self-employed fashion consultant Jennifer Roberge examines Pati Mari's wardrobe.

CAROL LORLAS

Wardrobe service helps women and men discover their style for every day

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NORTHAMPTON — When she was 3 years old, Jennifer Roberge received a pair of white-and-black patent leather Mary Jane shoes. She adored them to the point where she refused to take them off, even in bed.

"They were so gorgeous," Roberge recalled. "I remember it distinctly like it was yesterday."

And there were the black overalls adorned with colorful butterflies and large flowers, which she cherished for years. "I wore that until it became shorts," Roberge said. "It started long and I kept cuffing it and cuffing it until it didn't fit me anymore."

Roberge said she didn't have many clothes growing up, but what she had tucked in her closet were small, simple treasures that would ultimately influence her decision to pursue a career in fashion. And they taught her an important lesson which is central to her business — it's less about

'Girlfriend In Your Closet'

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quantity and more about quality. "The clothes we did have were really beautiful clothes," she said.

Roberge, 48, is a self-employed fashion consultant who founded Girlfriend In Your Closet, a wardrobe service designed to help women and men discover their everyday style. She operates the business from her home in Southampton and works with clients in Northampton and other Valley communities, and travels to Hartford, Boston and New York City as well.

Roberge visits her clients in their homes and "shops" in their closet, streamlining it and putting together outfits that best compliment the person's figure. Roberge works with people who have cluttered closets, who have made shopping mistakes or who have wasted at least 15 minutes in the morning wondering what to wear.

"What I do is very intimate with people," Roberge said. "I'm going to their home, I'm going in their closets."

Roberge demonstrates what features — such as color or fit — are best for each person, and why. "I want people to think of me as a coach or teacher," Roberge said. "I try to teach them how to see themselves in the mirror and figure out what to wear."

And if needed, she'll take her client shopping for new items. "When I go shopping with them, I don't just pick out things and have them buy them," Roberge added. "I teach them how to walk into a big store or boutique or secondhand store and figure out how to shop, how to find the best bargains. I can do it for them, but that doesn't help."

Most of the time, however, Roberge is able to "really work with the closet" and make simple adjustments in how the clothes already owned are worn. These might include tucking the shirt in, raising the skirt up a couple of inches or pulling a belt around a tunic or dress. Those tweaks can make a person look like they dropped 10 pounds or grew two inches, she said.

Packing advice

Roberge also offers services in packing, providing tips on how to pack light and still have many options for outfits when traveling. Overpacking was an issue for Becky Castro of Northampton, one of Roberge's clients. In preparation for a trip during the spring which involved many different activities, Castro asked Roberge for help because she knew it would take her hours just to get the suitcase packed.

"Mind you, this trip involved packing for dressing up in Las Vegas, rafting down the Colorado River, and then going off to San Diego at the beach and dancing," Castro said. After consulting with Roberge during a session that lasted one hour, Castro arrived at the airport with only one small suitcase.

And Castro found during the trip that she didn't wear all of the outfits Roberge had helped put together. "I was surprised that I didn't even wear many of the outfit choices," Castro said. "That was the beauty. Instead of feeling like I normally do when traveling, that I had used up that outfit and couldn't wear that outfit again. I



Fashion consultant Jennifer Roberge helps Pati Mari decide on the best color scheme.



Jennifer Roberge goes through Pati Mari's wardrobe.

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felt like I had so many choices of what to wear, and even felt like I had my closet in my suitcase."

Castro still uses many of the techniques Roberge taught her, which have since changed her attitude toward fashion in general. Castro said that she's now able to find new outfit combinations quickly and effortlessly — something she once thought was unimaginable.

Another client, Pati Mari of Southampton, said, "The experience with Jennifer was very positive. She began by assessing my natural coloring. Since I have lighter hair and skin and hazel eyes, I am what Jennifer calls a 'leopard.' This means that warm colors like chocolate brown, coral and earthy greens will enhance my look and make me look like I just got back from a long restful vacation."

"She demonstrated how to dress using the rule of thirds to make me look 2 inches taller and 10 pounds lighter," Mari added. "Together we looked at several pieces in my wardrobe and she showed me how to mix and match pieces I already own in new and interesting ways. With Jen's help I was able to let go of some things that I had been holding onto for years, yet never wear. This allowed us to reorganize my closet in such a way that the things I do wear are at my fingertips."

Mari said she gained confidence by working with Roberge. "I know what pieces my wardrobe needs and the colors that will help me look my best. I know I will spend less time and waste less money combing the mall for things I really don't need."

Anita Eliason, founder of Anita Eliason Designs which formerly was at Eastworks in Easthampton, is a close friend and colleague of Roberge, and praised her artistic skills.

"Jen has a great ability to get a visual picture and draw from it to make the great looks and the color balance," Eliason said. "It's made a profound difference."

Castro agrees. "She's really brilliant," she said. "It was such a pleasure to work with her."

Fashion school

Originally from upstate New York near Saratoga, Roberge lived with her family in France for three years when she was a child before returning to the United States. When she was 18, Roberge moved to New York City to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology, graduating in 1988 with a bachelor's degree in fashion marketing and merchandising.

Her first job out of college was store manager of a Gap store out west, where Roberge said she learned quite a bit about "hiring and firing and training" — and, more importantly, how to work with people.

She has since been the creative director or manager for various high-end fashion retailers, including Estee Lauder, Bill Blass, Eileen Fisher, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Bergdorf Goodman and Chanel.

Roberge did not design clothes; rather, she came up with ideas for overall impressions that certain outfits would convey when worn. Roberge said she needed a good understanding of how the body worked in accordance with different types of apparel.

"I've realized that fashion is really about the marriage of art and mathematics," Roberge said. "I've always been good at math. Those two link together really well."

As a store manager, Roberge said she also helped put together outfits for customers, including Hillary Rodham Clinton, Tony Bennett, Oprah Winfrey and Cher.

Roberge and her husband moved to the Valley in 2001, and they now live in Southampton with their 14-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter. "We moved to the Pioneer Valley because Northampton reminded me of Saratoga and also had a 'New York' vibe," Roberge explained. "We wanted to raise a family in an open-minded, cultural and beautiful environment and the Pioneer Valley fit the bill."

Roberge said that her clients are often surprised by how down-to-earth and approachable she is when working with them.

Sitting in the outdoor garden next to Tandem Bagel Co. in Easthampton, Roberge wore black leggings, a delicate navy blue vest draped over a simple black top, unembellished yet sophisticated-looking black sandals with double straps, with a hand-made magenta beaded bracelet adorning her right wrist.

Roberge said while she owns some high-end retail outfits, she gets most of her clothes from secondhand stores. She also pointed out that the type of clothes and where they come from hardly matters, as long as she feels at ease with herself — and that is a lesson she teaches her clients.

"I think people can look absolutely fabulous without having to look like a cookie-cutter," Roberge said. "I would much rather talk about proportion, the right color for someone. When someone's wearing the right color, they look like they've been on vacation, and the wrong color, they look like they need a vacation. I'm much more about what's the best color for you?"

Eliason, who sometimes gives Roberge an extra hand by tailoring clothes, pointed out that how people configure their outfits plays a large role in how others perceive them. Studies have shown that when someone meets another person for the first time, an impression is formed within a fraction of a second, and it's more often than not based not only on what the other person was wearing, but also how they looked in it.

Zesta Style

Roberge and Eliason, who lives in Easthampton, are also partners in the "full-service" fashion consultant business Zesta Style. Combining Roberge's experience as a fashion consultant and Eliason's background in clothing design and custom tailoring, Zesta Style works to "develop a way of dressing that is simple, uncomplicated, and elegant."

"Together, we've styled about 12,000 women," Eliason said. "You learn a whole lot when you've done 12,000."

Roberge and Eliason are now compiling style techniques in a "do-it-yourself" book.

Roberge said people should not be embarrassed about seeking a fashion consultant.

"One of my favorite testimonials from a client was like, people don't hesitate to go to a professional stylist to color their hair or a mechanic to get their car fixed," she explained. "They go to a dentist or optometrist because they can't have their friends check them to see if they're good. They hire professionals all the time, so why not a fashion coach?"

Roberge said the most rewarding part of being a fashion coach is witnessing her clients' reaction as they approach the end of the session on wardrobe consulting. She especially likes working with people who never thought of themselves as fashionable.

"That ends up being the cherry to the ice cream," Roberge said. "What they originally thought was going to be the main thing ends up being like the exclamation point — the transformation of how they see themselves. It's so profound, it's unbelievable."

Further information is available online at www.girlfriendinyourcloset.com and www.zestastyle.com. Zesta Style also is on Facebook.