

One Dress. One Year.

One Girl's Stand
against
Human Trafficking

Bethany Winz WITH
Susanna Foth Aughtmon



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the identity of certain individuals.

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For Morgan, Erin, Tabitha, and Tori.
This story would have been impossible without you four.
I love you more than you know.

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
1. A Dress and a Dream	15
2. Why Didn't You Come Sooner?	21
3. Going Public	27
4. Camping in the Dress	35
5. Cutting Out the Middleman	43
6. A Heart-Breaking Party	50
7. Not for Sale	59
8. Two Gifts, One Package	65
9. Just Call	70
10. Ice Cream and Insults	77
11. A Weekend in Pennsylvania	84
12. Hide-and-Seek	92
13. A Teenage Stage Prop	98
14. Halfway There	104

Contents

- 15. Running on Adrenaline 109
- 16. Good Enough? 115
- 17. An Unexpected Gift 120
- 18. The Day I Dyed 125
- 19. Denim, Diamonds, and Desserts 131
- 20. Hanging It Up 136

- Conclusion: The Journey Continues 143
- Notes 147

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Introduction

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Colossians 3:12

When I was in middle school, I found out that slavery still exists. In fact, every morning, millions of men, women, and children around the world wake up trapped in a system of human trafficking. Faced with the same bleak reality day after day, their dreams of freedom remain just that—dreams. I knew it didn't have to be this way, but if anything was going to change, ordinary people, people like you and me, needed to get involved. So at sixteen, I decided to do something about it.

From January 11, 2012, to January 10, 2013, I wore the same black dress every day. It was my way of raising awareness about and money to help end human trafficking across the globe. One Dress. One Year. For Freedom. It was a yearlong journey that I chose. People who are enslaved don't have many choices, so surely

I could limit my clothing choices for a year to help them be free. While my experience wasn't nearly the same thing as what those who are enslaved face, it was a connection I could make to help others understand human trafficking. I then asked people to partner with me by giving to one of six organizations working to end modern-day slavery.

Using the black dress as my primary piece, I added other clothing and accessories to create different looks, and each day I posted a photo of my outfit on my blog. By the end of the year, I'd worn that same black dress in 366 different ways—of course I would pick a leap year. I went into that year thinking I would do something big for God. I was going to raise \$100,000 to help end the fight against modern-day slavery. My blog and my dress were going to change the world.

I thought The Dress Project would give me value and make me special. I wanted to prove that I was better than other people my age. After all, unlike many of my peers, I was thinking about *important* things. Sacrificing normal clothes for a year or talking about slavery or challenging others to fight for the same cause was supposed to make me important too. Instead, the year I spent in the dress changed me in ways I never expected. It taught me to pay attention to fashion, and it altered the way I see myself.

That year, the people who partnered with me gave \$8,615 to International Justice Mission (IJM), Not for Sale, the A21 Campaign, Compassion International, Restore International, and Love146. The money was used to rescue people, provide them with rehabilitation services and legal counsel, and prevent human trafficking in vulnerable communities.

I'd always been told that pride goes before the fall, but I think some of us fall harder than others. I didn't come anywhere close to my fund-raising goal. Throughout the year I felt like I should have been doing more, but I couldn't figure out what—or how. Nothing seemed to go the way I wanted it to. It didn't make me

feel better like I thought it would. Instead, the dress helped me see myself for who I was (and who I still am): a girl who needed to be set free from perfectionism and pride and guilt and the notion that I could buy my way into God's good graces with my grand plans. I couldn't. All I could do was hope that somehow, even when I felt unlovable, he loved me still. The beautiful part was that in my darkness and my doubt, God met me. He's still meeting me. I'm sure your story won't be the same as mine, but I bet if you look closely, you'll find God meeting you too.

The Dress Project was a way that a high school girl helped raise money for organizations that are bringing freedom to people worldwide. During that year, though, I also discovered how much I needed the freedom God can bring. Freedom is for all of us, and it's something all of us can be part of extending to others. But it is only something we can participate in when we know that we are loved, and that we are already free.

—Bethany Winz

1

A Dress and a Dream

The Sewing Factory

A light breeze blows through my cracked bedroom window, causing the blinds to click against one another. Florida nights can be muggy, but in January, the chilly evenings are perfect for sitting on our front porch swing. Of course, for me, any time is perfect for that. Sweltering heat, pouring rain, cool evenings, and even blood-thirsty mosquitoes can't deter me from spending hours swinging back and forth, lost in thought. It's my sanctuary, a safe place to dream. And right now, it's where I want to be. Instead, I'm in my bedroom wrestling with the buttonholes on the front of the black dress I'm sewing. I've been working on this dress for months. A few weeks ago, I finally nailed the design. The entire process has been slow and frustrating, but the buttonholes might be the worst part. These buttons, which are too big for my buttonhole tool, seemed like a good idea when I first started sewing the dress. At that time, the dress itself seemed like a good idea. Now I'm rethinking both.

As I lean forward to thread my Singer sewing machine, a loose curl falls out of my bun and dances at the corner of my eye. Reaching up, I twist it back into the knot of brunette hair at the nape of my neck. I've lived here all of my life, but Florida and my hair have never gotten along. Every day is a new battle to tame my curls.

Once the needle is threaded, I look down at the stack of ten black buttons on my desk and sigh. Lifting the presser foot, I slide the dress off the machine. I stretch over the arm of my chair to grab a piece of scrap material from the floor and then give the buttonholes one more try. It's another flop. While the buttonhole is long enough, it doesn't leave any space for the button to pass through. I push my chair back and stand up. Sewing is not for the faint of heart.

I pace back and forth, trying to take deep breaths. Every time I turn, I see the dress and feel like I might hyperventilate. Tension creeps up my spine and into my shoulders. Flopping down on my bed, I bury my face in my pillow. "This dress is going to kill me," I wail. The dress that's piled on my desk looks nothing like my grand vision, but right now, all I want is to finish it. The plain cotton fabric is exactly what I'd wanted. It's light enough to get me through a Florida summer, and hopefully it will stand up to wash after wash. It hasn't been as no fuss as I'd expected though. The tension moves into my head, and I can feel it pounding in my ears. This year is supposed to be victorious. I'm supposed to be making a statement about how people everywhere can unite to end human trafficking. Right now, though, the only statement I'm making is that I need to take sewing lessons. No matter how hard I try, the perfectionist in me whispers that I can't get anything right—especially not this dress.

I roll over onto my back and stare at the ceiling. Purple and white paint meet in the corner, and I follow the purple down the wall to my bed, which is draped in a bright rainbow-striped quilt. It has every color but purple, so it clashes with the walls. *Maybe I should redecorate my room instead of working on the dress.* The

windows, which seem to let in all the heat of summer and all the cool of winter, are curtainless. *I could make some curtains. That would be easier than sewing a dress. Or I could paint the walls. Orange? Yellow? Anything but purple.*

This wouldn't be the first time I started a new project before finishing the last one. A painting project would be more fun than a sewing project. But this isn't just any sewing project. It's supposed to be a sewing project with a purpose. A dress with a mission. This is the dress that I'm going to wear for an entire year to help raise awareness about how pervasive human trafficking has become. This dress is supposed to change the world.

"Dinner's ready," Mom calls from across the house. I pull myself off my bed and shuffle down the hall to the kitchen.

"How's the dress coming?" Dad asks as I walk in. The silverware clinks as he pulls it from the drawer.

I sigh.

"That good, huh?" Michael says, falling into his chair. My big brother is home from college for Christmas break.

"I don't know why I thought buttons this big were a good idea." I slide out the chair diagonal to Michael's and sit down. "I can't figure out how to make the buttonholes work."

"What about the rest of the dress?" Mom puts a plate of steaming barbecue chicken on the table. My mouth waters.

"Well, it doesn't look like a black burlap sack anymore."

She laughs, and I laugh with her. She's seen the dress in every stage of the sewing process. She saw the original pattern that didn't work, and she's seen each step as I've tried to figure it out on my own. Finally, a month ago, I found a design that would work. I thought that I had ironed out all the kinks, but now I'm not so sure.

"I guess that's good," Michael says.

"It doesn't look like the picture in my head, but I think it's going to work."

"I hope it does," Dad says. "Now let's pray."

We bow our heads. Sewing has always been frustrating for me, but I'd hoped that I would be able to master it this time around. Making this dress, however, has been more difficult than I ever imagined it could be. I'm grateful that my family is around to support me. As Dad prays for our food, I start thinking about how I wound up here. A conversation Mom and I had back in September was the beginning of this wild journey.

I've always had more ideas than I've known what to do with. For as long as I can remember, I've been a dreamer. Holding up two fingers to measure the air, Mom used to say, "You're taking something that's this big and turning it into something that's this big," and then she would spread her arms wide. The problem was that I was much better at coming up with ideas than I was at following through with them.

I had a lot of thoughts about how I would like to play a part in ending slavery. That afternoon, she and I sat down and put all my ideas on paper. Should I do a dance production at church to raise awareness about human trafficking or go to the Not for Sale conference? Or should I concentrate on selling the bracelets my friends and I made to raise money for International Justice Mission?

Ever since my best friend, Tori, and I read *Do Hard Things* by Alex and Brett Harris, we've been looking for ways to join what they call The Rebellion: a teenage rebellion against low expectations. People don't seem to expect much from teenagers, but we're convinced that we can have an impact. We want to challenge ourselves and change the world. We've always dreamed ambitious things, but The Rebellion has given us a reason for our dreams. That afternoon with my mom was my plunge into making my Rebellion dreams into a reality.

As Mom and I worked through most of my ideas, I found one more that kept pushing its way forward. I was almost afraid to say it out loud because it seemed so big. It felt impossible. It had to do with Elaini.

Elaini is a young American woman with a huge heart for orphans in India. She couldn't travel overseas but wanted to do something to help them. Many of these children have only one outfit to their name, so for one hundred days she wore just one dress in honor of them. Her mission was to raise \$50,000 for an organization working with the children she lovingly calls "her kids." She used accessories to create different outfits and blogged each day, posting pictures of herself in the dress. She also invited her readers to join her in honoring these children by giving money. In just over three months, she exceeded her goal and continued raising money.

"I keep thinking about what it would be like if I did something to end trafficking like what Elaini did to raise money for the orphans."

Mom's eyes got wide.

"But I think I'd want to do it for an entire year like the woman who inspired her."

"You really want to wear the same thing for an entire year?" she asked.

I couldn't stop the words from tumbling out. I explained how I could do it to raise money for International Justice Mission, a global organization that works to end trafficking in the developing world. In the same way that Elaini connected her dress to orphans who had only one set of clothes, I would connect my dress to the plight of those trapped in modern-day slavery. People who are trafficked wake up and face the same thing day after day. I could wake up to the same dress every day. It wouldn't be nearly the same thing, but maybe it could help bring them freedom. I would make my own dress. I would also blog about it every day like Elaini did, complete with a charming photo of me in the dress. I would put up a Facebook page too. And then I would ask people to partner with me by giving money to organizations that were already working to help people coming out of human trafficking.

As Mom and I discussed different options, my plan began to take shape. It was going to happen. The dream of the dress was

born—or maybe I should say, the nightmare of the dress. Well, the nightmare of the making of the dress. Here I am, three months later, sitting at the dinner table still trying to figure out how in the world I’m going to make it work. Who knew sewing a dress could make you feel so incompetent? Dad finishes his prayer and passes the platter of steaming chicken.

“What about dress number two?” Mom asks.

It’s always been my plan to sew two identical dresses, just in case something happens to one of them. Now, though, I’m closing in on my February 1 start date and still haven’t finished the first dress. Things aren’t going quite the way I had planned. Sewing a custom-made dress is not as easy as I thought it would be. It may be time to lower my expectations a little.

“I think I’m going to be doing well if I can get the first dress done,” I say, wiping my fingers on a napkin. “I’ve given up on being able to sew a second one.”

That decision might come back to haunt me, but for now I need to back off a little on my grand plan. I can’t even think about sewing a second dress at this point, seeing as the first one feels like it might end me. I take another bite of chicken. Maybe some protein will give me the focus I need to figure out the buttonholes.

When dinner is over, I head back to my room and my sewing project. I lift the fabric off the machine and run my fingers over the stitching. I let it drop onto my desk. Protein or no protein, I don’t have the energy to sew anymore. I have no idea how I’m going to finish. I sit down on my cedar chest and reach across to my bed for Mom’s old laptop. Maybe watching the recording of the message Christine Caine gave at the Passion 2012 gathering yesterday will inspire me to sew. She’s an abolitionist and cofounder of the A21 Campaign, a nonprofit focused on ending human trafficking. I turn on the laptop. Little do I know that the next forty-five minutes will be exactly what I need to put the last touches on the dress.