

Keepsake

Making my memory quilt turned into the best memory of all **BY LISA FIELDS**

Before my seven-year-old daughter, Eva, was even born, she began amassing drawer-fuls of adorable baby outfits. And I had a lofty master plan for that pint-sized wardrobe, well before Eva had the chance to wear a stitch of clothing: Once she outgrew everything, I decided, I'd turn her clothing into a memory quilt. I could visualize the pastel and patterned fabrics intertwining into a coverlet for her future big-girl bed, documenting the fashion highlights of her formative years.

For a few years, I could only daydream about the quilt-to-be while I faithfully tucked away the gently worn clothing that Eva outgrew each season. Every now and then, while two-year-old Eva scribbled in a coloring book—shiny blonde hair spilling onto her drawings—or

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN CRONIN



four-year-old Eva strung together necklaces—head cocked to the side as she searched for the right beads for her patterns—I'd pore through Eva's old garments, trying to calculate how soon I'd be able to get started on the project.

My project.

I'm a crafter at heart, but as a full-time writer and mom, I had no time for anything as frivolous as a hobby. Nonetheless, I plotted out a long-term plan that would allow me to quilt a little at a time.

When I told people about the project, I always emphasized how much my creative, insightful daughter would cherish her one-of-a-kind quilt when she got older. But deep down, I knew that I was really making it for me, to give myself a long-awaited creative outlet.

By age five, Eva had finally outgrown enough shirts, onesies, dresses and pajamas for me to begin the quilt. I set aside a few minutes each night, after everyone had gone to bed, to delve into the project. The task was laden with happy memories: Here was the outfit that Eva wore home from the hospital as a newborn, crying for the entire seven-minute ride, with me scrunched in the back seat next to her. The pale blue dress that she wore to her first birthday party, months before she even learned to walk. The souvenir T-shirt from our first trip to Grandma's in Florida, when she gawked in wonder at the palm trees. At first, I held each cute, tiny garment gingerly in my hands, wondering if slicing it up was somehow wrong. But after I got over

the initial shock of putting blade to fabric, I worked slowly and steadily for a month, turning Eva's old wardrobe into piles of workable quilt pieces. I chose the best feature on each item of clothing—a ruffle, a pocket, an embroidered teapot—and made it the highlight of each square or rectangle.

Once I'd cut up every last piece of clothing, I had amassed enough colorful strips and blocks to blanket my dining room table, and I wanted to show off my handiwork. But to whom? The best person seemed to be Eva, I decided; it was her wardrobe, after all.

I wasn't sure how a five-year-old would react to seeing her favorite outgrown outfits snipped to shreds so before I unveiled my progress to Eva, I played up the concept of the completed memory quilt that would soon adorn her bedroom.

To my relief, she rifled through the quilt pieces delightedly, a glimmer of recognition lighting up her blue eyes every fourth or fifth square. Then she begged me to let her help finish making the quilt. I was caught off-guard by the request, and I couldn't resist her flattery, so suddenly, I had an assistant.

For a week or two, I expected Eva to lose interest in the quilt, but she was hooked. When it was time for Eva's bedtime activity each evening, she al-

most always picked quilting. Sometimes she'd sit on my lap, helping me decide which fabric patterns best complemented each other. Other times, she'd stand by my side to help me stitch pieces together on the sewing machine.

It thrilled me that she took such joy in our project, because I'd never before had anyone to share a hobby with so intimately. And I loved the idea of teaching my tech-savvy, smartphone-swiping daughter the basics of an age-old hobby.

The fabrics prompted many meaningful conversations. "I recognize that one!" Eva would say of the polka dots from a jacket she'd recently outgrown, and we'd discuss her favorite things about nursery school, where she'd worn the jacket daily. She also wanted to learn about clothing that she didn't recognize, so I told her what she'd done in certain shirts or dresses, such as taking her first steps or visiting her late great-grandmother. She soaked up the stories, amazed at the secrets being revealed from her own past.

For more than a year, her enthusiasm never waned. I'm sure that part of the allure was the alone-time that we shared over the quiet whirl-whir of the sewing machine. But she was also motivated by the promise of a keepsake quilt that she'd helped to make. She'd have the lightweight quilt on her bed every spring and summer for the fore-

seeable future.

We didn't end up finishing the quilt until the last day of November. Although it was chilly outside, I let Eva sleep with our masterpiece for one night before stowing it until May. That evening, I felt a real sense of accomplishment when I made her bed with the crisp, new quilt, and I couldn't wait until Eva's bedtime.

When I tucked Eva in beneath the very cover that I'd envisioned so many



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years before, I was surprised that she hugged me much tighter and longer than usual.

Then I saw my daughter's bright blue eyes beaming with pride by the glow of her nightlight, and suddenly, it dawned on me: Although I'd saved the material and had begun fashioning the quilt on my own, it had really been her project all along, and Eva had been anticipating this perfect, quiet moment even more than I had.