

Grace Ellen Stewart

After a bride's big day, there was often little to do with her wedding dress except box it up – possibly never to be unboxed again. In 2019, Grace Ellen Stewart and her mother, Lorraine, began a company that transforms a bride's wedding dress into usable garments like bridal robes or christening gowns for the bride's family. Today, Unbox the Dress employs a team of 25 operating out of a 12,000 square foot facility.

Grace was born as Grace Ellen Rojek in Canton, Ohio, in 1990. She enjoyed time with her mother, Lorraine Stewart, and grandparents, Jack and Lea Stewart. In honor of her relationship with them, she has legally changed her name to Stewart to honor them. Grace's childhood was full of adventure and creativity. She danced at Avondale Dance Center, learned piano, swam with the Arrowhead swim team, and played with her older sister, Kate, and younger brothers, Andrew and Daniel.

Grace moved to North Canton when she was in the 4th grade. During her years in North Canton, she participated in theater and choir, was Vice President of the National Honor Society, and particularly enjoyed performing in the flag line with the marching band. She participated in the speech team and qualified for the 2009 National Tournament in Original Oratory. She graduated from Hoover in 2009.

Grace attended Northwestern University. She minored in film and media, earned a certificate in integrated marketing, and graduated in 2013 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies. While at Northwestern, she participated in the Alpha Phi sorority and continued her public speaking career. She qualified for national tournaments in several categories and won 5th place in After Dinner Speaking at the NFA National Championship Tournament in 2012. She won Northwestern University's Mary Peterson Gilbert Prize for excellence in public speaking in 2013.

Grace worked briefly for Entertainment Cruises where she led the content marketing strategy for several national dinner cruise brands including Odyssey and Spirit Cruises. After health challenges brought her home to Ohio in 2016, she and her mother discovered several preserved wedding gowns that had belonged to women in her family. They started to imagine the company that would become Unbox the Dress. In 2019, Grace participated in the FlashStarts accelerator program out of Cleveland to obtain the funds that would allow them to start the company. In 2020, Lorraine and Grace decided to relocate the business to North Carolina's garment district. They were awarded a \$50,000 grant from NC Idea to make the move and open their first studio.

Within 18 months, the company needed to expand their facilities. They have doubled in size every year thanks in large part to their Signature Bridal Robe which allows a bride to wear a version of her mother's wedding dress as she

dresses for her own day. Grace has successfully raised over \$1.4 million in venture funding. She and her mother are proud of having a product that is sustainable and helps keep textiles out of landfills. The company makes donations to local art nonprofits and Beautiful America.

Grace lives in North Carolina where she enjoys exploring the beaches and mountains with friends and her dog, Molly. She has a close relationship with her siblings, nephews, and some of her North Canton classmates.

Grace has been an entrepreneurial inspiration to her home town of North Canton. The North Canton Alumni Association is pleased to welcome her into the Hall of Distinction.