



Rosemary MacIsaac hard at work on one of her carefully crafted designs.

COURTESY OF MACISAAC KILTMAKERS



LICENSED TO KILT



From a Cape Breton home, Celtic magic is made with fabric

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

It's a story Rosemary and Mac MacIsaac have shared many times over the years. It still makes them smile.

"We were living in Moncton back in the late 1980s," says Mac, who was born and raised in Central Bedeque, Prince Edward Island, and met his wife-to-be in Toronto in 1976, through mutual friends. "I was working as a corporate sales manager."

"And I was running a home-based sewing business," says Rosemary, who was born in Brantford, Ontario and moved to Cape Breton when she was two years of age. "I originally started making kilts because our daughter, Veronica, was taking Highland dance lessons."

"Then the other mothers started asking Rosemary if she could make kilts for their daughters," recalls Mac. One at a time, the requests grew.

"First it was five, then 10 kilts, then during the next three or four years, I was up to 100 kilts a year," says Rosemary.

"Then the kilt-making business grew to the point where Rosemary had to quit her other sewing work and was completely swamped with making kilts," says Mac. "So we made a family decision and a business decision that I would leave my career and join Rosemary in the business. We sold our house and moved to St. Peters, Cape Breton."

Just like that, MacIsaac Kiltmakers was born.

"Everyone thought we were crazy," say Rosemary. "So we said, 'If it doesn't work out in a year's time, we'll get jobs.'"

The MacIsaacs have now been in business together for 18 years, producing 150 to 200 kilts each year. They sell their kilts around the world—the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan—and all over Canada. Their customer profile includes Highland dancers, members of pipe bands, grooms and groomsmen, proud Scottish clansmen, women, boys and girls, and non-Celtic individuals looking for quality garments. They do business with 90 pipe bands alone.

A LITTLE KILT HISTORY

The Scottish kilt originated in the 16th century but was plain in colour. The pleated, wrapped skirt made of tartan-patterned wool has been in use in the Scottish Highlands since the late 17th or early 18th century. The knee-length "small kilt" evolved from the "brat" or woollen cloak (also known as a plaid), which was worn over a tunic. In Scotland today, most people regard kilts as formal or national dress only.

All kilts made by MacIsaac Kilts are custom-made, hand-sewn, and traditional. "We deal with six different weavers in the U.K. only," says Mac, "and source all of our tartan requirements from them."

Making a kilt requires great care. "The vast majority of our kilts are made for people we never see,"



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right here

Left: 2018 Basel Tattoo in Switzerland. The Canadian dance team were 50 strong and the girls in this picture are all wearing MacIsaac Kiltmakers kilts. Below: Mac MacIsaac with grandson Cian, daughter Veronica and son Matt.

says Mac. “So, we had to develop a very good measuring process. It tells people where, and how, to measure on the body. We call it our ‘Coles Notes Version’ of the measuring process.”

Even still, he continues, “We have to challenge a lot of the measurements because they simply can’t be right, on the men, especially.” Traditionally, men’s kilts, worn just above the belly-button, did not have a hem. “So,” laughs Mac, “We’re like the carpenter who measures twice, and cuts once. And the length is the most critical—once the kilt’s cut, you can’t change it back!”

No matter what height and weight a man might be, a kilt requires eight yards of fabric. The difference lies in the depth of the pleats.

People often wish to know how many pleats are in one kilt.

“There is no standard answer,” says Mac. “If you can picture eight yards of cloth laid out on the floor... this cloth needs to be pleated and sewn to arrive at the same measurements that the person’s body is.

“Someone with a 55-inch girth, and someone with a 35-inch girth will require their two kilts to be shaped and pleated differently, yet they both have the same amount of cloth used in their construction ... we say that there will be as many pleats as there needs to be when the kilt is completed.”

Also traditionally, girls’ kilts, worn at the belly-button and requiring five, six, and seven yards, tend to have hems. As the girls grow the kilts can be lengthened. Hand-sewn kilts are not cheap; the tartan fabrics can be very pricey.

INVESTMENT NOT COSTUME

“You can buy a kilt for \$150 online,” says Mac. “But it is not custom.” A man’s kilt from MacIsaac’s Kiltmakers costs \$850. Considering the cost of the imported, worsted wool, the duty and taxes, plus the time factor to hand-sew-and-pleat the kilt, and most people recognize the value of their purchase.

“It’s an investment,” says Mac. “Not a Halloween costume.”

From the beginning, Mac has worked as the company’s manager, doing the accounting and sales, and Veronica has sewn the kilts, as well as the Highland dancing and pipe-band outfits. They now concentrate solely on the kilts, which take 15 to 20 hours each to make.

“Our aim was to get back to our core business of making traditional, hand-sewn, custom-made kilts,” says Mac. “It’s what we do, it’s what we want to do, and it’s what we’ve built our reputation on.”

As part of their job, they both travel, going to the annual



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Highlands Games in Antigonish, and Celtic music concerts and festivals around the Maritimes, where their kilts are needed, or performers may need alterations.

“We love our work,” says Rosemary. “A lot of people are very appreciative. They even send us flowers!”

“We are huge fans of the MacIsaacs,” says Kylie MacHattie, bag-pipe instructor at the College of Piping and Celtic Performing Arts of Canada in Summerside, Prince Edward Island. “They help us keep our pipe bands looking great. We believe that looking well is as important as playing well.”

Over the past eight years, the college has had between two and three pipe bands enrolled during the year. Their uniforms are comprised of jackets, vests, and kilts. The MacIsaacs have provided great service to the college, Kylie says.

“Mac also tells the students how to wear the kilts and how to hang and care for them,” says Kylie. “Both he and Rosemary are so kind and helpful.”

And if clothes do indeed make the man or woman, then the MacIsaacs’ quality kilts supported the efforts of the college’s pipe bands at the World Pipe Band Championships in 2017, in Glasgow, Scotland.



COURTESY OF MACISAAC KILTMAKERS
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Left: Ken Morin with his sons Mac, Dave, and Rob. Above: Tartanwear, of course, is not limited to kilts and related accessories.

“We travelled with two pipe bands that year, in the Grade Four-B category, which included some teenagers and some students in their 20s,” said Kylie, “and we won the Championships!”

“I have my own kilt made by the MacIsaacs,” she continues, “which my husband gave me.” Her husband, James MacHattie, is the director of education at the college.

LOCAL PRIDE OF PLACE

Kelly MacArthur, owner of the MacArthur School of Dance in Sydney, Cape Breton, thinks the region is “very lucky to have the MacIsaacs.”

“There was at least a 10-year period where we didn’t have a custom kilt maker,” says MacArthur, who has taught Highland dance for 32 years. “We had to order kilts from Scotland.”

Now, she says, the MacIsaacs have made purchasing a kilt so much more convenient. “They’re at all the music festivals, and if we miss them, it’s an hour’s drive from Sydney to St. Peters.”

As for the quality of the kilts: “It’s second to none,” MacArthur declares. “Almost all my students wear them. And the majority of Premier-(level) dancers in the region wear MacIsaac kilts.”

Teaching a dance style that requires great physicality and precision has also made MacArthur “very particular” when it comes to her dancers’ costumes. “And so is Rosemary,” she says. “She will always make an adjustment for us.”

Moreover, she says, the quality is enduring. “When it comes time to re-sell, as many people do with growing kids,” says MacArthur, “you will receive three-quarters of the original price.” Most other articles of clothing don’t keep their value.

For many years, when the MacIsaacs first returned to Cape Breton, they were known as the proprietors of the Celtic Gift Store in St. Peters, which is also where they originally produced and sold the kilts and offered rentals.

“We started the store in 2000,” says Mac. They bought the building in 2003, and then, after nearly a decade, he says, “We eventually decided to slow down and get away from the seven-day-a-week work ethic.”

They also wished to downsize, and work from home. So they began to make plans to expand their family home, just outside of St. Peters, and put the shop up for sale.

NOT SLOWING DOWN

In 2009, the couple sold the gift shop portion of the business. Their son, Matt, age 39, and a musician, now runs the kilt rental business in Ontario. Their daughter, Veronica, 37, was trained by her mother to make kilts, but ultimately chose to become a modern tartan clothing designer. She founded Veronica MacIsaac Apparel, and lives in Halifax.

And Mac and Rosemary, both 63, now work a more civilized 40 hours a week, from the comfort of their own home. Rosemary’s mother lives next door.

“The Internet has allowed us to be here in Cape Breton, and to run our business in a rural setting,” says Mac. “Anyone who can find us online, can do business with us.” Like most self-employed people, the duo has no plans of retiring, he adds.

“The best aspect of working for yourself is having control over what you do,” says Rosemary, whose hands are rarely still, either measuring tartans, sewing tiny stitches, or smoothing the soft wool on her work table. “You don’t mind working long hours. There’s also a deep pleasure when you produce the final product.”

Canada is proudly multi-cultural, says Mac, and includes many Celtic people from the British Isles. “The kilt is perhaps the best icon for Celtic pride, and presence, in the Maritime region. And there is huge pride in wearing a clan tartan.” 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿