

Essay – A Grown Up Barbie

As a child, Jane Hamill thought Barbie was the ultimate in cool. Now a fashion designer in Chicago, Hamill realizes her belief in a doll was a belief in her own skills, creativity and ability to succeed.

I consider myself a feminist (political, economic, and social equality of the sexes), and I feel like a moron admitting it, but it's true: I believe in Barbie.

For me, as a kid, Barbie was about cool clothes, a cool job, cool friends and cool accessories: the airplane, the apartment building and the camper. I learned to sew so I could make outfits for Barbie and her friends, who took turns being the airplane pilot, the doctor, the fashion designer. Barbie was never about Ken. He was always a little dusty and in the corner. My Barbie didn't enter beauty contests, get married or have children. She went to Paris and New York for fancy dinners and meetings.

Years later, I became a fashion designer. I lived in Paris and New York and went to fashion shows and fancy dinners. It was all about the outfits and I began to wonder: am I just a grown-up Barbie? I am a strong, intelligent woman. My idols are supposed to be Georgia O'Keeffe or Gloria Steinem or Madeleine Albright. Am I in danger of becoming a puff piece like Barbie?

When I achieved my Barbie-style life, I wasn't so sure I wanted it. My husband is a prosecution attorney. He can change a person's life forever in just one day. I come home from work and say, I sold a great green dress today and you should have seen the shoes!

Today, I'm sort of the anti-fashion designer fashion designer. I don't particularly like shopping, and if someone says fashion is silly, I'm the first to agree. It's just clothes. But if the sleeve is cut just right, it makes a difference. It makes a difference in how you present yourself. So many people have body issues. I hope I can help people like themselves more.

Clothes are personal. And they're part of your identity. A few weeks ago, I got a call from a customer. She told me now that she has my clothes to put on in the morning, she's never felt so confident in her life. They may just be clothes, but they help her to be who she wants to be and to believe in herself.

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed Malibu Barbie I loved looked nothing like my red-haired, freckled self. But that didn't stop me from thinking I was just like Barbie — cool and independent and smart. It's only as an adult that I realize that my belief in Barbie is really a belief in my own imagination, in whoever I imagined I could be, and whatever I imagined I could do. I believe in imagining a life, and then trying to live it.

Jane Hamill grew up designing and sewing clothes for family members in her hometown of Chicago. She studied fashion in New York and Paris before opening her own boutique at age 25. Hamill is on the advisory board of Columbia College in Chicago, and a member of the Apparel Industry Board.