

Heads up for Rochelle's hats!



Rochelle Murphy, 57, has been designing hats since she was a child. She said she grew up believing that a woman wasn't fully dressed unless she was wearing a hat and gloves. Although she is a certified nursing assistant by day, she spends evenings designing hats for women who consider them essential to their Sunday dress. Some of her latest creations can be seen at Parks Family Buffet in Bellmead.

By Jessica Chia

Photos by Rod Aydelotte

Thanks to last year's royal wedding and the stylized headgear of celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Rihanna, hats are experiencing a resurgence in visibility.

Rochelle Murphy, of Waco, began designing hats nearly half a century ago, but only recently put those skills to use again.

"I was brought up and told, 'You're not fully dressed unless you're wearing a hat and gloves,'" said Murphy, 57.

"Fashion repeats itself. People used to wear hats to work. It'll come back. Everything comes back."

The daughter of a Baptist minister, Murphy grew up surrounded by well-dressed women in the church congregation, including her mother, who was known for her "exquisite taste" in fashion, she said.

"When we were little, my momma bought us hats for Easter," she said. "We got two outfits, for the morning service and the evening service. We all had to look our best."

Murphy, who graduated from Jefferson Moore High School, made her first hat to match an outfit she created for one of her dolls.

"I remember I got a whipping for it," she recalled. "I used one of my momma's old dresses. It had lace underneath the dress. I took the lace off and I made a dress by hand and a little hat to go on my doll. It wasn't perfect at that time, of course, but to me it was," she said.

As a young woman, Murphy continued to design hats, and seemed to have finally achieved success in 1980 when Waco's Goldstein-Migel department store agreed to carry them.

She created 30 original hats for the store, and was paid \$25 a piece. But she learned that the department store made more than a 600 percent profit on her handiwork, she said.

Discouraged, Murphy opted to sell her

“ My inspiration is a gift from God. It comes to me at night in a dream and I have to get up right then and I will be there until 3 in the morning.”



Earlene Keys, 63, shows off a frilly purple creation by Rochelle Murphy.



Corrine McClain, 91, the hatmaker's mother, wears a dramatic red cloche sprinkled with rhinestones.

hats on her own. She soon stopped making them altogether, however, due to challenges in her personal life.

“Different things took place,” she said. “Family members got sick, I got divorced, and I never picked it up again.”

After a 32-year hiatus, Murphy started to design hats again in 2010 for a clientele of women in traditional Baptist churches in the area.

“I just like making hats and designing things. I get wrapped up in it,” she said.

True to the “Rochelle’s Originals” label she sews inside each hat, Murphy makes sure every finished product is unique.

“None of my hats look alike. They’re all different, one-of-a-kind,” she said.

“I’m not plain Jane. I like my hat to draw attention. All my hats draw attention.”

Each piece, which she transforms from a plain straw hat into an elaborate headpiece using satin, silk flowers, beads or rhinestones, takes her between two and three hours to complete.

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Murphy has devoted an entire room in her townhouse solely to hat designing.

Although she often designs hats out of such inspiration, Murphy tailors the color and design to fit the specifications of her clients.

Her customers overwhelmingly request pastel hats for Easter, while they favor white hats for Mother’s Day.

“Mother’s Day and Easter are my busy season, because everybody wants

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a hat for their momma, auntie, grandma or somebody," she said.

Some customers seek Murphy to complete their own ensembles.

"They'll come tell me in church: 'I need a new hat for my outfit, girl!'" she said.

Last year, a chance encounter with Betty Young, wife of the late Robert H. Young, emeritus professor of music at Baylor University, provided Murphy with an invaluable tool for her craft.

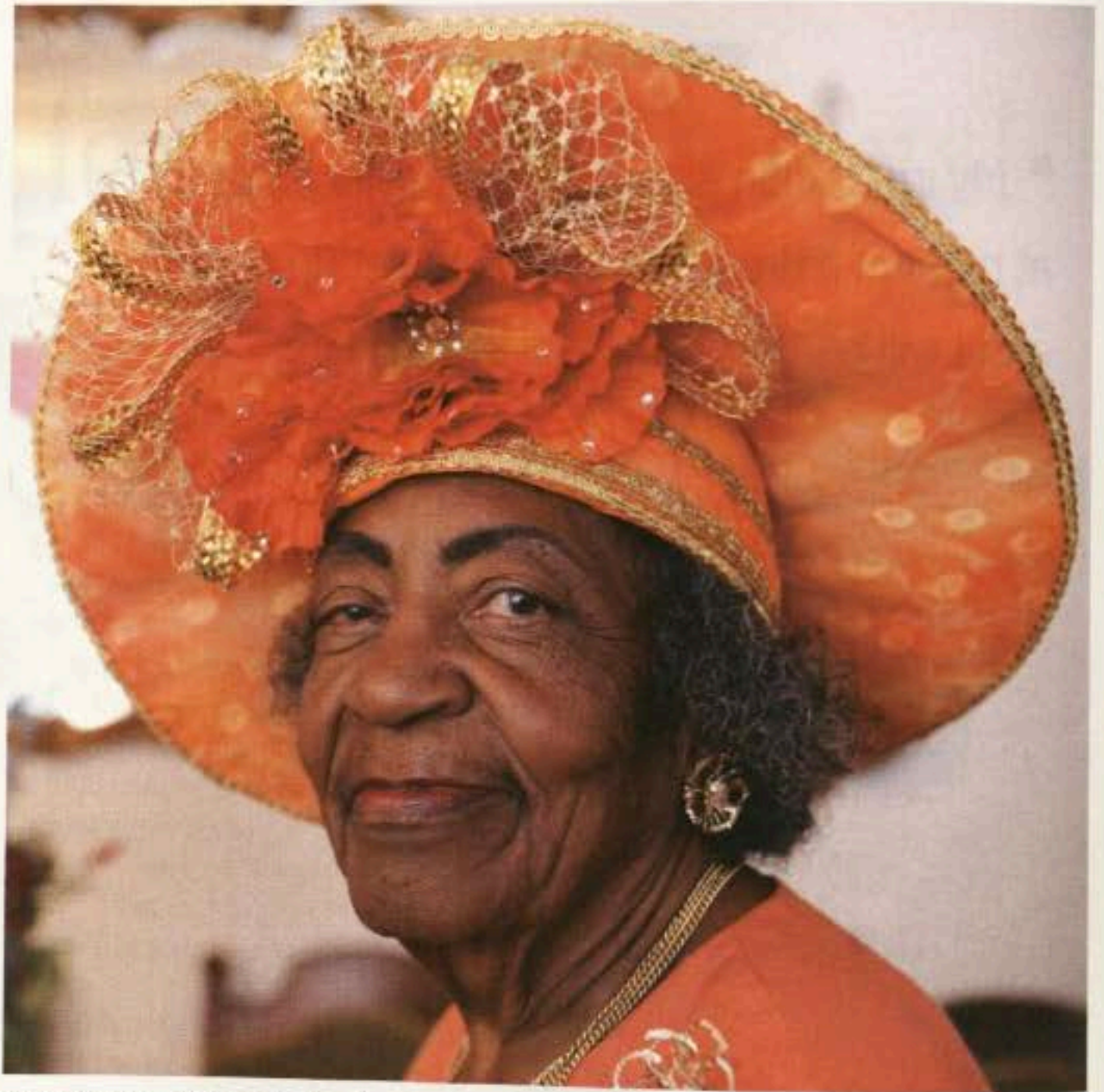
She was in a local beauty salon when she ran into Young, who had taught her how to sew in her seventh-grade home economics class at G.L. Wiley Middle School.

Murphy has worked as a certified nursing assistant for the past 41 years. She offered her assistance when she found out Young was struggling to care for her then-ailing husband.

In return for Murphy's aid, Young gave her former pupil a new sewing machine to help her execute her designs.

"I was blessed with that sewing machine," she said. "It cuts out a lot of time. Now instead of using my glue gun, I use a machine."

Murphy said the same skills have



Ethel Pimpton, 83, is resplendent in a swooping tangerine hat festooned with open-weave gold ribbon and red jeweled flowers.

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allowed her two seemingly unrelated passions – nursing and designing hats – to flourish.

“You’ve got to be patient. And you’ve got to love what you’re doing. It’s about making people feel good about themselves,” she said.

When she worked the night shift at Woodland Springs Nursing Center last year, she even combined the two.

“I took some supplies up there at night and I worked to stay awake,” she said. “The patients who don’t sleep (well) came up in their wheelchairs and they’d sit there and watch me. One lady liked to take the flowers apart for me. They got to connect.”

Murphy, who now works at Friends for Life, an adult day care facility on Lakewood Drive, charges \$65 apiece for requested hats. She also has a selection on display at Parks Family Buffet, 4138 Bellmead Drive, where those can be purchased.

Aside from the increased demand during April’s holidays and prior to large church events or Baptist conventions,



LaRue Dorsey, 79, adjusts her “Rochelle Original” pastel blue topper, which perfectly complements her white suit and pale blue shell.

Murphy admits that the market for hats is small.

Even so, she plans to continue her efforts after she retires from nursing.

“I keep on making them and just set them aside and eventually, they get out

there,” she said. “I’m not going to be discouraged.”

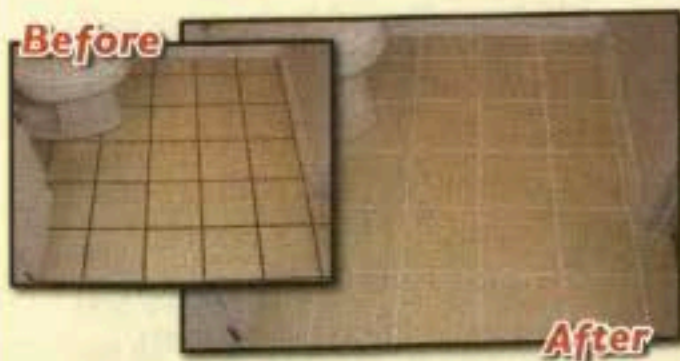
How to reach her

To contact Rochelle Murphy about her hats, call 420-6409.

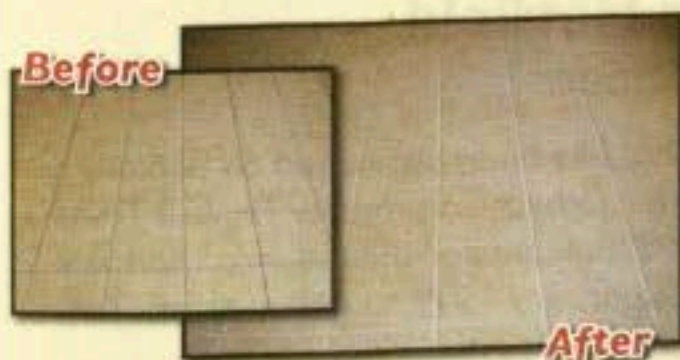
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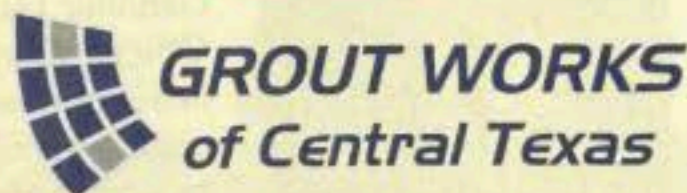
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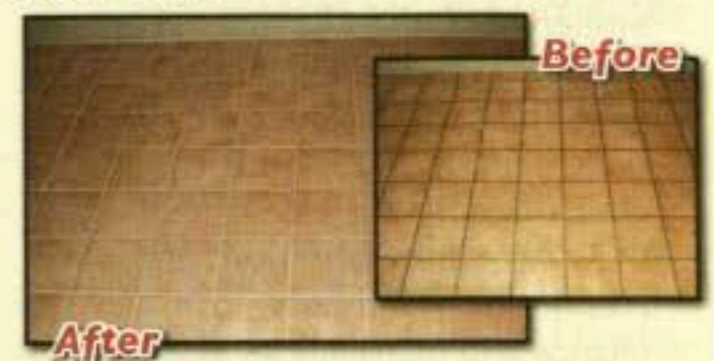
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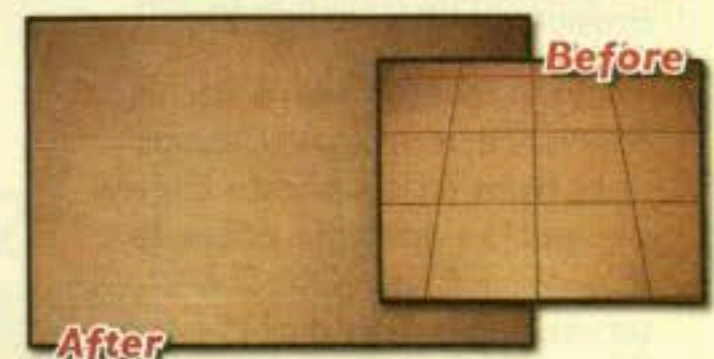


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