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CHAT WITH RENE

Former CBS "Early Show" host Rene Syler signs her memoir, *Good Enough Mother*, at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Books-A-Million, 8331 Golf in Niles. Info: (847) 470-7810.

The hardest working dress

Your favorite little go-anywhere black number has been a fashion constant since it appeared in 1926

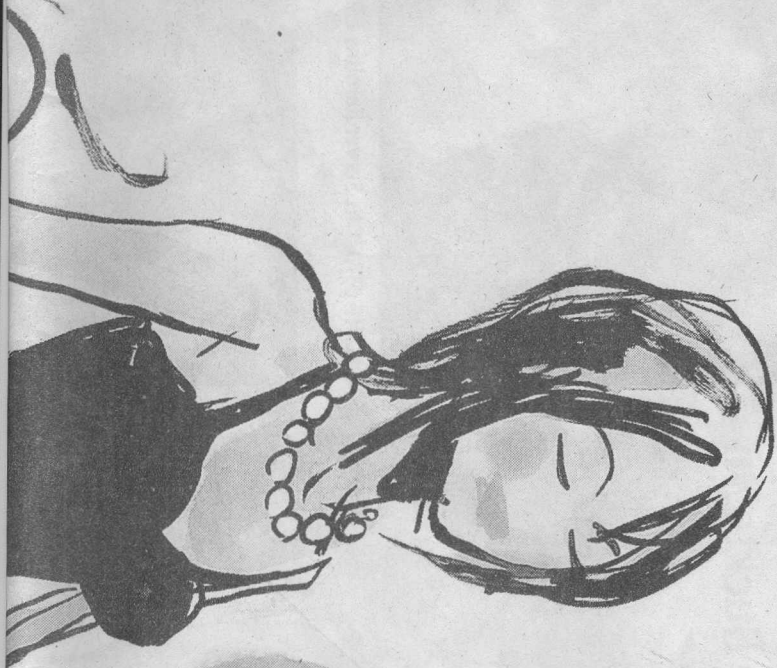
"To my mind, simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance."

— Coco Chanel

BY ROSALIND CUMMINGS-YEATES

The popularity of that ubiquitous fashion staple, the little black dress, points mainly to its very simplicity. It can be made formal with a toss of pearls, transform to

casual with funky flats and accessorized to be everything in between. In 1926, when Coco Chanel designed a black, sleeveless, jersey sheath cut just above the knee, she changed women's lives forever. Before that, black had been reserved for funerals and periods of mourning and jersey was only for underwear. But Chanel knew black was slimming and a simple, sleek, cut would flatter all body types. So for 81 years, the little black dress has remained a fashion constant, outlasting every year's style trends and even facing down this year's infantile little white dress. From stay-at-home moms to boardroom mavens, every woman's closet likely claims at least one. Because how and where a little black dress is worn varies according to a woman's personality and lifestyle, we're peeking into the closets of four Chicago area women:



ERICA COBB

26, WBBM-FM (96.3) radio personality

A popular on-air personality with the "Eddie and JoBo" morning show, Erica fills her days at the studio and attending station events. She describes her body type as athletic with broad shoulders, muscular arms and "a butt." "No matter what your body type is, you have to be conscious of how your clothes fit," she says. Erica has two favorite black dresses I've had for the longest time. It's from Akira and it's cotton with

« One of Erica Cobb's favorite's is a sexy V-neck, spaghetti-strapped dress from Akira. | ILLUSTRATIONS BY GUILLERMO MUNRO-SUN-TIMES

spaghetti straps, comes to a V at the neck, with a 3-inch empire waist under the bust. The bottom can be worn down or up, there are ties inside so you can bustle it and the bottom is asymmetrical. I wore it to the B-96 Summer Bash last year." The versatility of the dress is what sells it for Erica. "I wear it with a red or black or white belt and it changes the look totally," she says. "In the winter, I wear it with leggings." Her other LBD was a recent find. "I just got it at Express, it was the only one left and 80 percent off. It was a no-brainer" she says. "It's a three-quarter length halter dress with a silver sequin plate attached to the bust. I wore it for my birthday dinner." Versatility and comfort are her style imperatives. "I like something that no matter what I'm doing, I'll get that camera-ready angle that's flattering for my body."



ILLUSTRATION BY GUILLERMO MUNRO-SUN-TIMES

in show business

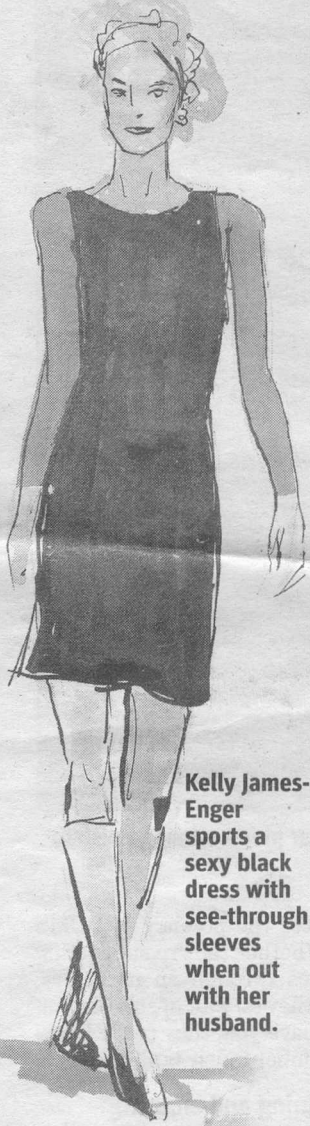
KELLY JAMES-ENGER,

41, freelance writer, motivational speaker and fitness expert



A busy mom and wife whose days are divided to cover speaking engagements, writing projects and playing with her 21-month-old, Kelly mostly wears pants for work but owns three little black dresses. "I have one for funerals, one that has a scoop neck, tight bodice and flowing skirt for when I want to be a little sexy," she says. "It's cotton and Lycra, mid-calf length with elbow-length sleeves and perfect for holidays when you don't want to have all your junk out." Her third dress she reserves for dates with her husband. "It's sexy, cut on the bias, with a deep scoop neck, chiffon, see-through sleeves and above-the-knee length. When I put it on, my husband says, 'We'll get good service tonight.'" Kelly describes her body type as athletic and curvy. "I'm an hourglass figure," she says. "I'm tall but I have a small waist so I dress to show that off."

Kelly James-Enger sports a sexy black dress with see-through sleeves when out with her husband.



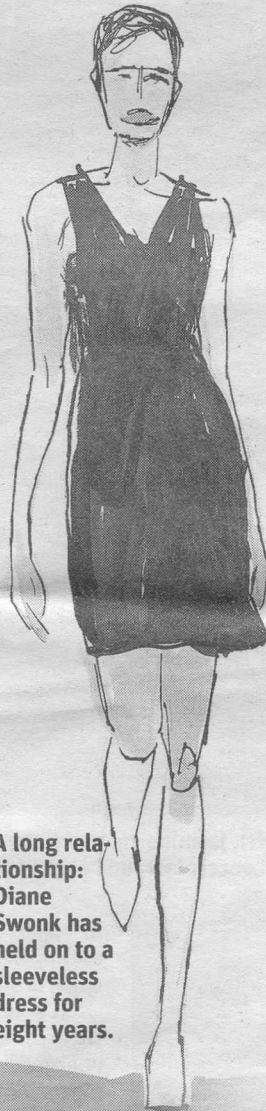
DIANE SWONK

45, senior managing director and chief economist for Mesirow Financial



One of the world's most respected economists, Diane is often consulted by policy makers from Washington to Tokyo. Her whirlwind career requires clothes that perform for meetings, TV appearances and black-tie events. Not including her formal gowns, Diane owns four little black dresses. "I've had one for eight years, it's a Tahari polyester blend, sleeveless, with cutouts around the neck. I wear it winter or summer," she says. "It's mid-calf length and form-fitting and it'll go from the economic club to a black-tie event." Slender and lithe, Diane buys only clothes she loves. "I've learned to not wear anything that you don't really love and don't feel comfortable in, otherwise it's a waste of money," she says. Another of her LBDs, also by Tahari, is made of silk chiffon. "It goes across the seasons."

A long relationship: Diane Swonk has held on to a sleeveless dress for eight years.



LISA 'LA BORIQUA'

30s, professional dancer and instructor



A fixture at Latin and salsa nights for downtown clubs, Lisa spends her days in meetings for her Latin Street Dancing dance company, creating dances like the Super Bears Cha Cha and taking care of her 4-month-old baby. She calls her 5-foot-2-inch curvy frame a "hot and sexy body type" and boasts eight to 10 little black dresses. "I'm bustier now and have a lot more booty, but my best assets are my legs," she

says. "I love to show them off in little black dresses with high slits and lots of movement." Her clothes must be versatile. "I look for dresses that can be conservative during the day and I make adjustments at night," she says. "It can't be too delicate or tight and it has to fall well. It has to flow when you're twirling."

She favors dresses that are simple and easy to accessorize. "My favorite has short sleeves,

a scoop neck, it's cut straight down and falls mid-thigh," she says. "It makes me look taller because it makes my legs look longer. I wear it with a jacket, depending on the temperature. I have long, curly hair and I like to show it off. My dress doesn't overshadow it. You have the dress and there's the dancer!"

Rosalind Cummings-Yeates is a local free-lance writer and yes, she owns a little black dress.

Lisa "La Boriqua" loves to dance in a black dress.

