

These prom gowns are priceless

Project offers dresses to girls for nothing more than a 'swirl and twirl'

08:49 AM CDT on Saturday, April 16, 2005

By Dawn Cobb / Staff Writer

The strapless red dress fit 17-year-old Rachel like a glove as she twisted and turned in front of a mirror.

The Slidell teen was one of more than 40 high school girls who stopped by the DATCU lobby to choose from 250 dresses donated by area women.

The Cinderella Project debuted this year, matching slightly used finery to young women with dreams of dressing up for the prom.

"I think this is an awesome program," Rachel said.

Jasmine Jaramillo, 15, and her mother, Sandy Crozier, sat on a couch in the lobby, watching the makeshift fashion show as teenagers donned dress after dress, looking for just the right style.

Last year's prom dress was bought with the family's income tax check, Crozier said, but this year's check is already promised for another expense.

"Last year, we spent \$150 to \$160," Crozier said.

The Cinderella Project comes at a welcome time for them and others.

"I see girls I know who would not have had a chance to get a dress," Crozier said. "We're real pleased."

"They are so nice," Jasmine said, referring to the blue strapless gown she chose for the upcoming May 7



DRC/Gary Payne

Sandy Crozier, left, and her daughter Jasmine Jaramillo look at prom dresses Thursday at DATCU in Denton. Students were able to pick from more than 200 dresses donated to the Cinderella Project, which was formed to help girls who might not have been able to buy formal dresses.

prom at Ryan High School and the many styles of dresses hanging on clothes racks nearby.

"I even recognized a few name brands," she said.

Everything from cocktail dresses to taffeta and jewel-encrusted gowns in sizes 0 to extra large offered a wide variety of choices.

Watching the girls exit changing rooms, project organizer Charlotte Vining asked each girl to model her selection.

"Swirl and twirl. We want to see you," she said.

It was the only request of the girls. No names, no money, no return expected.

"You just see their faces light up," Vining said.

In recent weeks, word has spread from high school bulletin boards to local help organizations, inviting teenage girls to stop by the local credit union on Mulberry Street.

The project started after Vining talked to Tony Holley, who began collecting donated dresses in 2002. He and his wife, Mary, owners of the former Locust Street Ladies Shoes in Denton, gave the dresses away until their shop closed two years later in June 2004.

"I'm a single parent with two girls," Vining said.
"I know how expensive prom is."

After noticing Holley's plea to have someone take up the prom dress project, Vining began asking businesses and friends for help.

DATCU President Dale Kimble offered storage space to keep the dresses and other donated items. Alicia Hagey, owner of Encore! Encore!, a Lewisville consignment shop, contacted her consignees who then donated nearly 100 dresses.

Others offered their time to alter dresses, sitting at one of three sewing machines inside the credit union lobby. And more businesses and individuals donated costume jewelry, gloves and other accessories.



DRC/Gary Payne

Edie Jones, who volunteered to help make alterations, hems a girl's prom dress as part of the Cinderella Project on Thursday.

Edie Jones, a friend of Vining's, said she learned about the Cinderella Project via e-mail.

"I like to sew," she said, while putting the finishing touches to one of the prom dress selections.

"They look so cute," Jones said. "They look like little princesses."

Tasha and her mother, Wanara, both tried on dresses — one to attend the prom, the other to act as chaperone.

"When she called, I thought she was playing," Wanara said. "This is neat. This is very neat."

As she unwrapped the dresses to prepare for the teens' arrival Thursday, Lu Chadwick of DATCU said the process felt like Christmas. Teenage girls were transforming right before her eyes, she said.

Then, just before leaving, several stopped for a moment.

"Some of the girls who've gotten a dress have said, 'Hey, I've got a couple at home. Can I bring them?' I thought that was very sweet," Chadwick said.

Donations are accepted year-round at DATCU, Vining said. Next year, plans are to have two days for promgoers to stop in for their attire.

During the makeshift fashion show, DATCU employees watched from their offices, some stopping by to offer supportive comments to the teenagers.

"To see these young people smiling and happy — that's pretty special," Kimble said. "A lot of folks have come together to help these ladies get ready for the prom — a special occasion."

To Vining, the Cinderella Project is one close to her heart and one she hopes to expand for next year to help as many girls and boys as possible.

"I have a real tender spot in my heart for the youth," Vining said. "They're our future and I want them to have good memories."

[DAWN COBB can be reached at 940-566-6879.](mailto:DAWN_COBB@dentonrc.com)

CINDERELLA PROJECT CONTRIBUTORS

The following businesses and individuals contributed time and donations to the Cinderella Project:

* Dale Kimble, DATCU president; JoAnn Ballentine, DATCU South Branch manager; Judy Warnack, DATCU customer service; Jo Ellen Knight, DATCU real estate; and various DATCU employees

* Sally Beauty Supply

* After Dark Tuxedos, which offered two tuxedo jackets and two tuxedo rentals for boys

* Alicia Hagey of Encore! Encore!

* Employees at Rent-A-Center corporate headquarters and J.C. Penney corporate headquarters in Plano donated dresses.

* Kim Beauchamp, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Denton Fourth Ward, Edie Jones of Denton Bible Church, and Jenni Mabrey of Denton County United Way offered time as seamstresses.

* Denton County United Way employees

* Denton Chamber of Commerce, various members

SOURCE: DATCU organizers of the event

Online at: http://www.dentonrc.com/s/dws/drc/localnews/stories/DRC_There_gowns.1e2b01bb5.html