

From the Hartford Courant

Girls Find Perfect Gowns At Prom Dress Giveaway

By KATHLEEN MEGAN, Courant Staff Writer



NASREEN MUSTAFA, 18, left, of Manchester, and Gigi Neama, 17, center, of Windsor, try dresses while browsing for accessories with Laura Coates at the prom gown giveaway in Windsor Sunday. Mustafa and Neama attend University High School of Science and Engineering, where Coates teaches math. (PATRICK RAYCRAFT / April 13, 2008)

By KATHLEEN MEGAN | Courant Staff Writer

April 14, 2008

WINDSOR - Gigi Neama strides confidently into the room full of 750 dresses and makes a beeline for the pale yellow dresses in the smaller sizes.

"You don't want yellow," her mother, Irene, counsels.

"Yes, I do," Neama answers.

"Red is your color," her mother says, pulling out a red beaded number.

"It's pretty, but it kind of has a lot of beads," says Neama, doubtfully.

The mother-daughter dialogue while prom dress shopping is exactly the same — whether it's at the mall or at Sunday's second annual prom dress giveaway, sponsored by Princess & the Prom.

The four-hour event at the Hilton Garden Inn in Windsor offered a way to ease the significant financial burden of that spring ritual — the prom.

The average high school girl can easily spend more than \$500, when you figure the cost of the ticket, the dress, the shoes, the hair, the makeup, the transportation. A couple of years ago, a group of Granby High School girls and their mothers, led by Cheryle Podgorski and her daughter, Lauren, got together and decided to start a prom dress giveaway to help girls who might otherwise not be able to purchase a dress. They talked to high schools, colleges and businesses as they collected lightly used gowns, raised funds and found volunteers for the event.

Last year, they had 350 dresses and 125 girls; this year they were up to 750 dresses and 200 girls. "Every year, we'll try to improve it," Podgorski said. "This year we added the dressing rooms and a waiting area with movies running."

The most challenging aspect of the event is trying to reach the girls who could use a free gown, Podgorski said. The 550 remaining gowns from Sunday's event will go into storage until next year.

"We're not giving them away fast enough," Podgorski said. It would be nice, she said, if there was someplace — perhaps an empty commercial building — where they could run the giveaway for more than one afternoon.

The girls who did attend the event were clearly eager, with some showing up almost three hours before it began. For Neama, of Windsor, and her friend, Nasreen Mustafa of Manchester, the giveaway was a welcome way to defray prom costs.

Like many of the girls at the event, Nasreen had already made a rather discouraging trip to the mall. She saw a poofy, pink dress that she liked, but the cost? "It was \$299," she said. "I was like, this is ridiculous."

Rhyshia Manga of Hartford had also made the pilgrimage to the mall and found one she loved — green, black and white. "It was like \$250. I was crying," Rhyshia said.

At Sunday's event, there were a few tears of joy as the perfect dress was found, along with plenty of giggles and excitement as the girls and their mothers looked through the dresses.

In order to avoid gridlock, the organizers of the event have firm but fair rules. The girls are given numbers as they arrive, first come first served. Then, 12 at a time, they enter the area with the dresses and are assigned a personal shopper. This year those volunteers included sorority members from [Trinity College](#) and the [University of Hartford](#).

Each girl is allowed three choices to try on at a time. As she disqualifies gowns, she can return to pick another. However, if there is a waiting line, she is allowed only 30 minutes to shop. This keeps the shopping focused with little time for trying dresses that aren't real contenders. She's also allowed to pick out one accessory from a table that includes shoes, shawls and purses.

On her first trip into the dressing room, Neama takes the yellow she loves, and then, dutifully, the red and the white gowns her mother recommended.

"I really like this yellow," Neama said. "I like it a lot."

But alas, the yellow is too short, so it's on to the red. To her surprise, Neama finds, "It's nice, I like it! ... Why are you looking at me like that?" she asks her mother.

"You never want what I like, but then you like it when you try it on."

Rhyshia, meanwhile, has had success: a red strapless dress that has made her forget about that expensive one. Mustafa, too, has found the dress of her dreams: a white one with black tulips on it. As she whirls from side to side in front of the mirror, she beams. It's exactly right.

All the girls said that getting a dress for free will ease the burden of the rest of prom night costs. Said Rhyshia, "This is going to give me money to get my pair of shoes and my hair and my nails done. My mom will do my makeup ... I really can't wait to show off my dress and feel like a princess."

For more information on the event or to donate dresses, see [PrincessAndTheProm.org](#).

Contact Kathleen Megan at kathy.megan@courant.com.