

A LITTLE HELP

The Prom Dress You Dreamed Of, But Couldn't Afford

By KATHLEEN MEGAN | The Hartford Courant

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JENNIFER MCCANN of Haddam scrutinizes a dress during a sorting session for Princess & the Prom at Best Cleaners in Windsor. The group will provide about 1,500 free prom dresses this weekend to any area high school girl who might not otherwise be able to afford one. McCann's husband is an owner of the cleaners, which helped in the collection and cleaning of the dresses. (ROSS TAYLOR / HARTFORD COURANT / March 25, 2009)

Arlene Meskony of [Winsted](#) calls it a [Cinderella](#) experience.

Her dad was sick during her junior year of high school and money was tight. She wasn't sure she would be able to afford a prom dress when she heard about Princess & the Prom.

The 3-year-old organization offers free dresses to girls who could use a little help with the steep costs of a prom.

In Meskony's case two years ago, the prom ticket cost \$75, and then there was the cost of hair and make-up.

She and her mother arrived at the Hilton Garden Inn in Windsor — where the gown giveaway event is again being held this Sunday — about an hour or two early.

"I think I was the second person there," Meskony says. She quickly found the perfect dress: a light purple, full-length, spaghetti-strapped dream dress. It even still had the price tag on it: \$130.

"Financially, it really would have been" impossible for her to have purchased a dress like that, says Meskony, who is now a freshman at Northwestern Connecticut Community College. "The opportunity to pick out a dress worth more than \$100 was completely fantastic."

Victoria Brown, a college freshman at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, had a similar experience with the program. When she was a high school junior in Enfield, she was juggling three jobs and she was looking at having to work more hours if she wanted to get a prom dress.

Princess & the Prom "was very helpful," she says. "It was a lot less stressful, not having to work 50 hours to be able to afford a dress. Instead I could focus on having a good time."

Brown, who had several friends who would not have been able to go the prom without Princess & the Prom, was so inspired by the program that she and her sorority sisters are thinking of starting a similar effort in Worcester next year.

Princess & the Prom was started by a group of Granby High School girls and their mothers, led by Cheryle Podgorski and her daughter, Lauren. Publicizing their efforts at high schools, colleges and businesses, they collected lightly used gowns, raised funds and found volunteers to staff the giveaway day.

Every year the event has grown: 1,200 dresses have been collected this year. Podgorski says the group received an assist this year from Best Cleaners, which offered to collect dresses at each of their 11 locations, clean them and deliver them to the Hilton.

"We are tremendously grateful," says Podgorski. "We are just not set up to handle a thousand dresses."

Podgorski likes to have a 4-to-1 ratio of dresses to girls so that shoppers have plenty of choices.

The girls are not required to show evidence of financial need.

"We trust each family to determine their own financial need," says Podgorski. "It's the honor system."

But girls must bring a valid high school identification card.

In addition to a dress, each girl also gets to pick out one accessory: a purse, a shawl or shoes.

For Meskony, the magic didn't stop at finding the perfect dress. All participants are eligible for a "princess for a day" drawing, which includes a pair of prom tickets, gift certificates for hair, make-up and other benefits.

"I picked up the phone and they told me I had won the package," says Meskony. "I didn't pay a cent for my junior prom. It was just wonderful."

The gown giveaway is scheduled for 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Hilton Garden Inn in Windsor. First come, first served. Shoppers are allowed to bring one female guest. More information about the program is available at www.PrincessAndTheProm.org