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*Bethany Blair, a junior at Columbia River High School in Washington state, dressed in a gown provided by the Fairy Godmother project, has her prom photograph taken before the prom.*

# Making Teenagers' Prom Dreams Come True

By LAUREN MONSEN

## U.S. charities donate gowns, accessories.

For generations of American teenagers, the crowning social event of their adolescence has been the “prom” dance at the end of their junior and senior years in secondary school: a rite of passage into young adulthood marked by formal evening attire, flowers and a flurry of excitement.

Yet for many teenage girls, the expense of a stylish gown with coordinating shoes, handbag and jewelry puts the prom experience out of reach.

The word “prom” is derived from the 19th-century practice of a “promenade ball,” which was combined with the tradition of holding a graduation ball at the end of the academic year for upper-level secondary school students. Boys typically appear in tuxedos, while girls usually wear floor-length dresses.

The prom is a milestone in the lives of U.S. teenagers, says Ellen Chang, president of the Fairy Godmother Project ([www.fairygodmotherproject.com](http://www.fairygodmotherproject.com)), which collects and donates prom outfits to students in Houston, Texas.

“Prom season usually runs from March to May,” Chang says. “Kids talk about it constantly, and there’s peer pressure to fit in. Often, the prom is a bigger event than their [secondary school] graduation ceremony. For a lot of these kids, it’s the first time they’ve worn formal attire.”

All across the United States, charitable organizations with such evocative names as the Glass Slipper Project, serving the Chicago area, in the state of Illinois, ([www.glassslipperproject.org](http://www.glassslipperproject.org)) and Cinderella’s Closet, serving the states of Kentucky and Indiana, ([www.cinderellasclosetnky.org](http://www.cinderellasclosetnky.org)) are collecting new and used formal gowns and accessories to distribute, free of charge, to secondary school students who cannot afford to buy them.

The Glass Slipper Project is regarded widely as the non-governmental organization (NGO) that started the nationwide trend. The NGO sets up “boutiques” of donated clothing and accessories in local public schools; to date, the project has helped more than 10,000 girls find their perfect prom dresses.

For three consecutive Saturdays during prom season, Chicago-area secondary school students have been able to select the gowns and accessories of their choice, aided by Glass Slipper Project volunteers who serve as the girls’ personal assistants. Although eligibility requirements vary among different organizations and from region to region, the Glass Slipper Project does not require proof of financial need. Junior and senior girls from any Chicago metropolitan or suburban high school—public or private—can participate, as long as they present a valid secondary school identification card. Because of limited supplies, only



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Far left: Taylor Pringle chooses her prom dress from the 1,187 outfits distributed free of charge by the New Orleans Hornets Legacy initiative at Rose State College in Midwest City, Oklahoma.

Left: Amanda Sullivan, a senior at Santaluces High School in Palm Beach County, Florida, tries on shoes outside Becca’s Closet, which provides dresses and accessories to girls who can’t afford to purchase them for their prom.



An excited Nicole Gilcrease, 17, of Ocean Springs, Mississippi, picks a blue sequined prom dress from a range of outfits collected for high school students affected by Hurricane Katrina.

the first 600 girls in line are guaranteed admission on each designated "shopping day."

The Glass Slipper Project serves "girls from homeless shelters as well as disabled girls, who receive top priority," says volunteer Carolyn Johnson. "One year, we had an exchange student from Paris who received a gown from us, designed by Vera Wang [a New York-based fashion designer]. She needed it to wear to a formal school function back home in France. She couldn't believe we were giving it to her for free; she was in tears."

Chang says that the Fairy Godmother Project in Houston outfits immigrant teens (many from the Caribbean, Central America and Nigeria) and teens in foster care or homeless shelters, but the majority simply come from families suffering financial hardship.

Chang's organization solicits donations of clothing by staging "dress drives" throughout the community, often with the help of local partners.

The project recently began partnering with a chain of hair salons called Visible Changes. "Dresses are dropped off at their

various branches and then taken to their corporate headquarters, where we pick them up."

Roughly 35 volunteers assist the girls who come to the Fairy Godmother Project to assemble their prom outfits by providing gowns, shoes, purses, shawls, jewelry and unopened makeup items that have been donated throughout the year. Boys are provided with free tuxedo rentals.

"The volunteers have a good time and enjoy seeing the transformation when the girls put on their gowns," Chang says. "Some of our volunteers are makeup artists and hair stylists who help the girls get ready, which is a great bonus for teens who can't afford professional services."

Cinderella's Closet, run by the Immanuel United Methodist Church in Lakeside Park, Kentucky, offers disadvantaged girls a selection of donated gowns and accessories on scheduled "shopping days," and each girl is paired with her own personal "fairy godmother" to shepherd her through the process. To participate, "girls need to be referred through their pastors, school guidance counselors or social workers," says Susan Eaton, youth minister at Immanuel United.

"The church's youth ministry put this together, with over 50 volunteers," says Eaton. "This year was a big success, so we're expecting next year to be huge. We arranged dress drives with the local schools, and we got over 1,200 dresses." Leftover dresses will be "banked" for the 2008 prom season, along with subsequent donations, she says.

"We've gotten a lot of thank-you notes" from grateful girls and their families, says Eaton. "Some of the girls e-mailed us photos and stories from their proms. It's very gratifying."

The prom is important "as a coming-of-age ritual," she adds. "When you're young, that's what you look forward to. We didn't want any young girl to miss out on the opportunity to participate, to feel special and beautiful, simply because she couldn't afford it."



Lauren Monsen is a USINFO staff writer.

## Education USA events in India: July-August

# USEFI CALENDAR



### Northern Region

July 10, 17, 24

August 7, 14, 21

"United States: Explore the possibilities of Higher Education," basic orientation program at 2.30 p.m. at USEFI, New Delhi.

July 12, 19, 26

August 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

"United States: Explore the possibilities of Higher Education," basic orientation program at 2.30 p.m. at the American Center, New Delhi.

July 31

An information session with a representative from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, on "Higher education in the U.S.: Prospects for international students" at 2.30 p.m. at USEFI, New Delhi

August 3

Pre-departure orientation program for students admitted to U.S. universities for the Fall 2007 session.

### Eastern Region

August 3-4

Information seminars on "Higher Education in the U.S." at schools and colleges in and around Kohima, Nagaland.

August 27-31

Information seminars on "Higher Education in the U.S." at schools and colleges in and around Gangtok, Sikkim.

### Southern Region

July 11, 18, 25

August 1, 8, 22, 29

"Exploring New Worlds," a basic orientation on higher education in the United States at USEFI, Chennai.

July 12

Pre-departure orientation for Fall 2007 students in Chennai.

### Western Region

July 10

Pre-departure orientation for Fall 2007 students from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the World Trade Center in Mumbai. Pre-registration required.

July 12, August 2, 17

Q and A session on U.S. admission procedures for USEFI members at 11 a.m. at the American Center in Mumbai.

July 12, August 8, 17, 29

Basic orientation on U.S. higher education at 11 a.m. at the American Center in Mumbai.