



Donated Prom Dresses Create New Memories For Homeless, Disadvantaged Girls



Photo by [Ana Tintocalis](#) / KPBS

Above: Teenage girls have a wide variety of prom dresses from which to choose.

By [Ana Tintocalis](#)

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SAN DIEGO — Most people consider a high school prom as a rite of passage. But that experience of glitz and glamour is often denied to students whose families are living in poverty. But a group of fashion-savvy women in San Diego County are trying to change that by trying to create new memories using donated dresses.

Eleven teenage girls huddle in a small dressing room in downtown San Diego. Gowns of sparkling sequin and colorful chiffon are slung over the door and hung on racks. The girls try desperately to pull-up zippers so they can squeeze into their favorite dresses.

Trying on prom dresses for teenage girls is crucial part of the whole high school prom experience. That's because it's here where a young lady hopes to find the perfect gown. And now that prom season is in full swing, this kind of dressing room experience is a common sight at department stores.

But what's not so common on this day are the students trying on the dresses. Each girl here is either homeless or living in poverty.

"Right now I stay with my mom, my sister, my nephew and my niece," says 17-year-old Dawn Horton.

Horton and the other girls attend The Monarch School, a campus that takes-in homeless students and helps them through school. Dawn says she and her mom have been homeless for the past five years. Now they're staying with her sister.

"Its just a really tiny apartment. So I sleep on the floor, my mom sleeps on the couch, and my nephew and niece sleep with my sister in the room. So I really can't afford a lot because I am still part of being homeless," Horton said.



Photo by Ana Tintocalis

Above: A young girl inspects her gown in a floor mirror. Her family couldn't afford to buy her a prom dress this year.

The Monarch School tries to make teenage life as normal as possible by hosting events like high school proms. And this year all 11 girls are being treated to their very own free prom dresses.

"We're really excited today, we have a ton of dresses and everything is color coordinated!," says Angela Geisler, founder of San Diego's Princess Project, a non-profit group that allows young ladies a chance to pick the dress of their choice from an collection of donated formal gowns. The result is a dizzying array of dresses in every size and in every color.

The Princess Project has been helping disadvantaged youth for six years in the Bay Area. Now its expanded to San Diego. Geisler says she made it a point to collect only the best gowns.

"We've got Vera Wang (dresses) in here, and BCGB (dresses) in here. These dresses are at least 200 dollars!," Geisler said.

But Geisler stresses this event is not so much about the dress, its about making young women feel good about themselves, whatever their circumstance.

"Its just so amazing to see a girl try on a formal dress," Geisler said. "Honestly, prom is a rite of passage It was special to me and its special to these young women. It's something every woman can relate to, putting on a dress that makes you feel good and beautiful."

And in keeping with that philosophy, Geisler transformed a downtown office space into a hip fashion boutique for the dress giveaway. A team of volunteers acts as "personal shoppers" for the young girls, catering to their every need and offering words of encouragement.

Once the girls settle on a dress, they move onto accessories -- a room full of earrings, necklaces, evening handbags and shawls.



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Photo by Ana Tintocalis

Above: Prom dresses are offered in every color of the rainbow.

Its here where we meet-up again with 17-year-old Dawn Horton. The tall, wide-eyed teenager is wearing ripped jeans and sneakers. A stark contrast to the gown she holds on a hanger. The dress is a floor-length strapless dress in varying shades of blue, Dawn's favorite color.

"I skateboard and I do a lot of boy stuff," Horton said. "And when I put the dress on, I just felt like a girl. I just felt more girlie, it made me feel more confident. My mom would be so happy that I put a dress on!"

And organizer Angela Geisler says the sense of being a independent, confident young lady is exactly what the Princess Project hopes to inspire

"Its the most satisfying thing when a girl finds a dress," Geisler said. "I mean I had a mom today come in and hug me and say, "Thank you so much for doing this for us. I never would have been able to afford something like this for my daughter." And it brought me to tears."

The Monarch School will hold its prom this year at the San Diego Zoo in early June.