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Nonprofit helps teens dress to impress

Nonprofit organization helps teenagers acquire prom attire

By Meg Barone Correspondent

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ANSONIA – Janet LeBlanc was concerned she'd have to break the bank to prepare her two teenage daughters for that rite of passage called high school prom, a long-awaited dream date that can turn nightmarish when promgoers and their parents are hit with the event's exorbitant price tag for tickets, attire and transportation.

Just as the single mother of three, who lost her job three months ago, wondered how she would afford two gowns, a statewide private, nonprofit organization stepped in to defray the cost.

Covenant to Care for Children hosted a Silver Prom Dress Expo Sunday at the LaRosina Room behind Pilgrim Bar-B-Que, where more than 200 new and gently used gowns and dresses, with original price tags of between \$80 and \$450, were available free of charge. Organizers asked for a donation of \$10 per dress from those who could afford it. The proceeds will help fund the organization's programs for abused, neglected and impoverished children. Last year, Covenant to Care for Children provided basic necessities to 27,850 children statewide through its Adopt a Social Worker program alone.

This is the third year Covenant is hosting the expo, but it's the first time the event was held in the Naugatuck Valley.

"It's a very good thing because a lot of people from the Valley are out of work, so this helps, and the proceeds go to a wonderful cause," said LeBlanc, whose daughter Rhiannon Roberge, 13, tried on more than 40 gowns before deciding on a strapless

mint green gown with a lace bodice. She will wear it to the Ansonia High School Prom on May 1.

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"It's comfortable and it complements my skin tone and it's pretty," Rhiannon said.

Her sister, Kayla Roberge, 16, settled quickly on a sophisticated white gown with iridescent beads along the Empire waistline. Kayla, who is engaged, said she chose it to wear to the Hamden High School prom because it can someday be converted into a wedding gown.

Dozens of teenagers chose from seven racks of donated gowns and dresses in a variety of colors and styles ranging in sizes from 0 to 24. All were grateful for the alternative shopping experience.

"Why pay 500 bucks for a dress you'll only wear once? Memories don't come from what you wear. They come from who you're with," said Latisha Gonzalez, 19, of Ansonia, who selected a silky black gown with a V-neck to wear to boyfriend Matt Godfrey's prom. Godfrey, 17, is a senior at Ansonia High School.

"This really helps, money-wise," said Antoinette Boyd, 18, of New Haven, who will go to the Hillhouse High School prom. Boyd said prom is difficult enough to afford when a gown can cost hundreds of dollars and then there is the ticket, which can cost about \$200. "Then there's hair, make-up, shoes, jewelry, pocketbook and nails [manicure]," Boyd said, all of which could top \$1,000.

That's hard on any budget, said Meral Prewitt, a regional coordinator for Covenant's Adopt a Social Worker program. Prewitt, who works in the Stratford office, said Covenant had previously targeted the event toward low- and middle-income families but opened it to others this year because the economic downturn has robbed so many families of discretionary income.

"This is a very important piece of the pie, to look elegant and to help elevate self-esteem," said Michele Gandy, owner of Michele's Alterations and Design Elements, across the street from the LaRosina Room. Gandy volunteered to fix zippers and prepare gowns in advance of the expo, and she is offering a discount for alterations.

Prewitt said males have not been overlooked. Covenant to Care for Children has funds available this year to help male prom-goers rent a tuxedo and shoes.

The organization will host another Silver Prom Dress Expo on April 3, 4 and 5 at St. John's Episcopal Church, 768 Fairfield Ave., Bridgeport, which will feature more than 500 gowns.

Find out more Contact Covenant to Care for Children at (860) 243-1806 or visit www.convenanttocare.org.

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Lisa Belhumeur, 17, of Ansonia, left, gets some assistance from volunteer Belinda Rivera to help her find a prom dress Sunday at the third annual Silver Prom Dress Expo at the LaRosina Room behind Pilgrim Bar-B-Que in downtown Ansonia.

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