

Pretty at the Prom

Dresses find another chance to go to the dance

By Peggy Kreimer
Post staff reporter

Erin Peterson can still feel the weight of her prom dress – black beads encrusting an off-the-shoulder sheath that was literally heavy with glamour.

“It was probably a little more than we should have paid, but it was my senior prom. That only happens once,” said Peterson.

The dress was everything she’d dreamed of. That’s why she understood the yearning in a teen’s voice last year as Peterson was shopping in a Snotty Fox resale shop in Erlanger, Ky. “She was talking about this beautiful turquoise prom dress,” Peterson said. The girl’s foster mother said they couldn’t afford it, and the girl was asking the clerk to “please put the dress on hold.”

Peterson found the foster mom, had a hasty conference, and then Peterson brought the dress for the teen. “Her face just lit up. She said ‘I feel just like Cinderella,’” Peterson said.

That turquoise dress, or maybe the black beaded one, is why Peterson and any army of “fairy godmothers” will be sending more than 100 Cinderellas to proms across Northern Kentucky this spring, with the help of Cinderella’s Closet. It’s a program Peterson and the Immanuel United Methodist Church youth group launched to collect donated prom dresses, shoes and purses and offer them free to teens who couldn’t otherwise afford the prom.

Peterson is youth counselor for the group. “I don’t have any daughters,” she said. “I have one little boy, and I’m a pretty girly girl. I remember my prom. I think every girl remembers prom. Every girl should have a chance to find the dress of her dreams and feel like Cinderella.”

A similar program in Cincinnati called Kenzie’s Closet is heading into its second season, after outfitting 135 young girls for proms last year. Girls in both programs must be referred by school officials, social workers or ministers. Many come from low-income neighborhoods, but others are from areas that appear to be affluent, said Kenzie’s Closet founder Brynne Coletti of Indian Hill.

“Financial situations change. You never know what’s really going on in a home,” she said.

The prom dress program is designed to make sure every young woman gets a chance to go to her prom in style. “We had young women last year who had never had a dress on in their whole life,” said Coletti. “One girl started crying. She said she had no idea she could look that pretty,” Coletti said.

Both programs are run by volunteers, supported by donations and have a single goal – to give girls a prom experience to remember.

“From the time they walk in the door, we want to make sure they’re treated like the beautiful princesses they are,” said Peterson, who will have two “shopping days” for girls at Cinderella’s Closet at the church in Lakeside Park, Ky.

More than 60 adults have signed on as volunteer “fairy godmothers.”



Erin Peterson, right, started a program at Immanuel United Methodist Church in Lakeside Park, Ky., where people donate prom dresses and accessories, and girls in need get to shop free. Peterson, a youth counselor at the church, is shown with the church’s youth minister, Susan Eaton.

“We’re going to take their coat when they walk in, serve them terrific snacks – all in pink because that’s what Cinderella would eat,” Peterson said. She’s planning pink lemonade, pink cookies, pink candy.

Women will be available to give mini beauty treatments, make alterations in gowns, and help the girls choose sizes and try on dresses.

Peterson already has more than 500 dresses and Northern Kentucky high schools are still holding dress drives. “I think we’ll have 700 or more,” she said.

Kenzie’s Closet has 1,000 dresses, with more coming in daily, said Coletti. Last year, Kenzie’s Closet operated out of the Dress for Success headquarters, downtown. This year the program has its own location – the lower level of 2010 Madison Rd. in O’Bryonville. “The landlord has given us the space at very minimal cost,” said Coletti. “Everybody has donated – contractors, plumbers, carpet, paint, furniture.”

Appearance Plus dry cleaners became a major partner, collecting dresses, cleaning and repairing them and storing them. “This is a real gift from the community to these young women,” Colletti said.

The cost for proms can be daunting, by the time you get a dress, shoes, jewelry, purse. Many teens wear a prom dress only once. Coletti and her daughter, Kendell, had talked about the problem for years. “When she was a senior at St. Ursula, one of the girls in her class couldn’t afford to go to prom. It really upset the girls,” said Coletti.

“She did get to go. The girls never knew who helped make that happen.”

Two years ago, Coletti decided to marshal friends and take a stab at collecting and redistributing dresses. They decided to call the project Kenzie’s Closet, named for Makena Anne Comisar, a teen who was killed in an auto accident. Kenzie, as she was called, was the most giving young lady,” said Coletti.

“I believe women need to take care of each other, to reach out any way we can. Kenzie was one of those people who was always reaching out to help someone else,” Coletti said.

The project has taken on that giving energy. Just about everyone Coletti contacted spread the word to more people.

“The first dress we got was from a breast cancer survivor who said, ‘I felt like a princess in this dress.’ The second one was from a woman on the west side. Her daughter was in Iraq and she emailed her about the program. Her daughter said that dress was something special to her and she wanted it to be something special to someone else,” said Coletti.

“That’s when I knew this was going to work.”

Cinderella’s Closet

Donations: Dresses, shoes, accessories, new cosmetics or cash donations may be made to Cinderella’s Closet at Immanuel United Methodist Church, 2551 Dixie Hwy., Lakeside Park, Ky. 41017. Donations may be dropped off at the church from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays through March 9 for this prom season.

Referrals: School officials, church pastors or social workers may refer teens for the program through March 5.

Shopping: teens will choose dresses by appointment on March 17 and 24.

Information or to volunteer: Call Immanuel United Methodist Church at (859) 341-5330. Web site www.cinderellasclosetnky.org.

Kenzie’s Closet

Donations: Items donated by May 1 will be available for girls this prom season. Dresses, shoes, jewelry, shawls and other accessories may be delivered to:

Appearance Plus Cleaners, locations at 3505 Erie Ave., Hyde Park and 6812 Clough Pike, Anderson, both open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Friday and 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays, or at 18 W. Third St., downtown Cincinnati, 7 a.m. to 6:30

p.m. Monday through Friday.

Camargo Racquet Club, 8215 Camargo Rd., Madeira

Kenzie's Closet, 2010 Madison Rd., O'Bryonville, 11 a.m. to 1p.m. Tuesdays.

Checks may be made to Kenzie's Closet, P.P. Box 43285, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45243.

Referrals: School counselors or social workers must refer teens to the program.

Shopping: Teens choose dresses a individually scheduled times on 18 shopping days.

Grand opening: reception for potential donors or volunteers, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. March 12 at Kenzie's Closet, 2010 Madison Road. Public welcome to view the facility.

Information or to volunteer: (513) 533-PROM (7766) or Web site Kenziescloset.org