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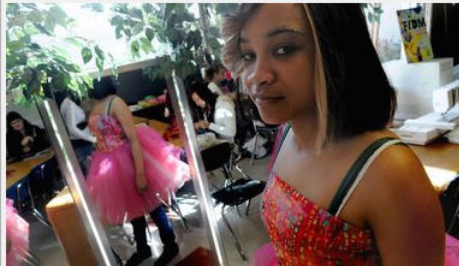
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Celebrate prom lite

Students looking for ways to save, like sewing dresses

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Savan Miller, 15, displays her winter formal dress in Gail McAuley's sewing class at Lincoln High School in Stockton on Thursday morning.

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By Jennifer Torres
Record Staff Writer
March 09, 2009 6:00 AM

Visions of a prom night like the ones in the movies, like on TV, like in the magazines, could tumble into heartbreaking collision over coming months with economic realities that see families straining to pay for even rent and groceries.

Over many decades, prom has emerged as a teenage rite of passage with a checklist of essentials - a dress, a corsage, a limo, a dinner - that may be difficult to reconcile in a county with an unemployment rate well into the double digits.

And yet, confronting the idea that an experience thought to be priceless actually has a price - and it's too high - is difficult too.

Dresses needed

To donate a dress Cadres Shelton, 14, and her mother, Babette, have started a local chapter of the group Becca's Closet, which collects new and lightly used formal gowns and donates them to girls who can't afford one. They are based in Tracy but hope to serve the whole county. To donate or to set up a confidential appointment to pick out a dress, call (510) 714-7482 or e-mail babette.shelton@libertymutual.com

"There's no lag time to prepare for these kinds of major shifts," said Francis Ryan, director of the American Studies program at La Salle University. His book, "Drowning in the Clear Pool: Cultural Narcissism, Technology and Character Education," deals in part with feelings of entitlement among American youth.

"For a child or adolescent, it's difficult to process intellectually," he said. "Especially if the child's peers come from homes where the parents have not lost their jobs."

According to a recent survey from North Dakota State University, the average couple spends about

\$600 on prom. Most of them get at least some help from their parents.

"People go all out," said Lyndi Webb, a 16-year-old junior at Lincoln High School, where prom is May 9.

Lyndi was in Gail McAuley's fashions class this week, sewing the bright pink halter-neck gown she'll eventually wear to prom.

McAuley said she usually has several students in her sewing classes who make dresses for formal school dances.

"Especially now, when you've got Kohl's and Target, stores that carry nice things at cheaper prices, it's not always the least expensive way to go," she said. "But they don't want to look like they bought off the rack."

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Lyndi said her dress will cost her \$50. "A prom dress at the store could be \$200."

Matt Wallaert is a social psychologist and lead scientist for just thrive.com, a financial advisory service for young adults.

He encouraged teens to think up unique, rather than grandiose, ways to make prom memorable - a picnic on the roof of a friend's parent's small business rather than a white-tablecloth dinner, for example.

But he acknowledges it can be hard to make the case that memorable doesn't always mean expensive.

"Youth have a more limited range of experience," he said. "You and I know that you will have a 1,000 fancy dinners in your life. Or at least 100."

But when you're 16, prom feels like the only chance.

Babette Shelton remembers her Tracy High prom and said she understands how important something can be that to adult eyes seems frivolous.

"Especially in today's environment, we're expected to look a certain way, have certain things," she said. "There's nothing worse than feeling like you can't go somewhere because you don't have."

Shelton and her daughter, Cadres, a freshman at Tracy High, have started a local branch of Becca's Closet. The nonprofit group collects formal gowns and distributes them to girls who need a special-occasion dress but can't afford one.

"I hear girls in the locker rooms during P.E. or at lunch time, especially right now because prom is around the corner, saying, 'I really want this dress but my mom won't let me get it because it costs too much,'" Cadres, 14, said. "We don't want anybody to miss out."

Cadres and her mother hope to hold a fashion show sometime this month to display their dresses in time for proms.

Girls from throughout the county can make confidential appointments to visit their home and pick out a dress, Shelton said. She's also hoping to arrange times to bring the dresses to schools so girls can find one there.

"The dresses we have are gorgeous," Cadres said. "They're all sizes, all different colors. Long ones and short ones. Whatever you're into, we have a dress for you."

Contact reporter Jennifer Torres at (209) 546-8252 or jtorres@recordnet.com.

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