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EL PORTAL

Girl Scouts hold Cotillion Ball in El Portal



Kenya Cunningham, from Allapattah, sits with nine other debutantes during the Girl Scouts Annual Cotillion, Saturday, Feb. 7, at the El Portal Community Center, 500 NE 87 St. The dinner and dance party was part of Decisions for your life, a Girl Scout program designed to improve self esteem and healthy decision making skills. DANIEL BOCK / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

BY PAMELA DUQUE PDUQUE@MIAMIHERALD.COM

Tiaras and long princess-like pink dresses are just a fairy tale for many girls, but for 10 Girl Scouts, it all became a reality -- at least for one night.

The Girl Scout Council of Tropical Florida hosted its first Cotillion Ball for 10 teenagers who are part of a program intended to build self-esteem and life skills for young women from low-income families.

The event, which took place Feb. 7 at the El Portal community center, featured white and pink decorations, a formal dance and choreographed performance by some of the girls -- many of whose families could not afford a traditional debutante celebration.

"This feels like this is my sweet 16," said Henryetta Williams, 17, a junior at Northwestern High.

Like the other nine girls, she was wearing a sparkly satin dress the color of cotton candy.

The dance was part of Decisions For Your Life, a program created in 1983 by the local Girl Scout council to help build self-esteem, develop character and learn etiquette.

The girls also participate in activities that teach them how to maintain a healthy lifestyle -- encouraging them to eat right, stay drug-free and learn about the consequences of being sexually active.

One of the programs is called "Baby, Think it Over." The girls wear a vest simulating third-trimester pregnancy for 24 hours. They also take home a baby simulator, which cries and needs to be changed, fed and pampered.

In order to participate in the dance, the girls were required to attend at least three of the workshops and maintain a 2.0 grade point average.

"They're really responding well to the program," said Christina Martin, public relations and marketing director of the Girl Scouts Council of Tropical Florida.

The cotillion is the highlight of the program, especially for girls graduating from high school this year.

The night started at 6:30 p.m., when the girls arrived at the venue in a white limousine.

The 10 guests of honor wore silver tiaras and corsages with roses that matched their dresses, which were donated by Becca's Closet, a charity that provides formal wear for proms and sweet 16 celebrations.

"I have the outfit that every girl dreams of," said Kenya Cunningham, 17, a junior at Northwestern.

But their dresses were just part of what made their night special. The debutantes made their grand entrance accompanied by their dance partners -- fathers, uncles or family friends -- who held their hands and walked them to the center of the room.

Tierra Jones, the host and a former Girl Scout, introduced each girl, reading her accomplishments.

"Today we celebrate these girls who have overcome many challenges," Jones said.

The introduction was followed by a prayer by Pastor Orlando Wilcox. Girls danced with their fathers -- or father figures -- to *Dance with my Father* by Luther Vandross.

The girls also danced with their mothers to *Mama* by Boyz II Men.

Tashana Johnson, a 16-year-old sophomore at Northwestern, was accompanied by Desmond Hart, 13, whom she considers a brother.

Her mother died 13 years ago and her father 15 years ago. She has since lived with her godparents, Henry and Deserie Hart, Desmond's father and mother.

"Tashana has been a Girl Scout for three years, and it's teaching her how to be very mature and lady-like," Deserie Hart said. "I thought the dance was a beautiful thing."

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