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UPPER EASTSIDE: Upper Eastside rehab center holds clean prom
 THE VILLAGE SOUTH, A MIAMI REHAB CENTER, HOLDS 'PROM' DANCES EACH YEAR AS
 PART OF ITS ADOLESCENT TREATMENT PROGRAM, TO SHOW TEENS HOW TO ENJOY LIFE
 WITHOUT ABUSING SUBSTANCES

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Were it not for the woman he calls "Ms. Cheryl," Michael Ford could have missed his chance to enjoy a high school prom.

"No way I would've made it," said Michael, 14, an angel-faced boy who has used and sold drugs, broken into homes and taken more of life's hard knocks than many men.

But Cheryl Patella, a recreational therapist at the Edgewater-based Village South drug treatment center, refused to let her young clients miss that milestone.

With help from Village staff and merchant donations, Patella organized a prom for the center's teenage clients at the Harvey Seeds American Legion post on the Upper Eastside.

"I'm having the best time of my whole life," Michael said. "I wasn't going anywhere with my life the way I was."

Girls flipped their fancy coifs and swished glitzy **Becca's Closet** gowns, while well-groomed boys strutted like peacocks in sharp Men's Wearhouse tuxedos. They bumped, swayed and threw their arms in the air while a Power 96 radio disc jockey spun club tunes.

"A lot of them come from rough environments," said Patella, who last year organized the program's first prom. "The looks on their faces, the excitement when they're picking out their outfits and when they see the limousines, that's the most gratifying thing."

Most are undergoing two- to six-month stretches of residential treatment, which includes individual and group therapy, 12-step meetings and an in-house school.

And while recent state-mandated budget cuts are forcing the Village to close one of its units and lay off several employees, the residential Adolescent Treatment Program is safe for now, said administrator Sharon Crippen.

"It was especially important to keep our adolescent girls' program, because it's the only one in Dade, Broward and Monroe counties," Crippen said Thursday. She said the center's funding was cut by close to \$1 million.

The prom is part of the recreational therapy program Patella uses to "resocialize" the Village teens. "It's very important to teach these kids to have fun again, to enjoy life without getting high."

She's taken her charges to Art Basel events in the Design District and to jazz concerts at North

Miami's Museum of Contemporary Art. They've gone to baseball games and to see Bizet's opera The Pearl Fishers. The trips help "her kids" to blossom, she said.

Circuit Court Judge Jeffrey Rosinek knows some of the Village teens from his courtroom. "I hope they remember how special they felt that night," he said Thursday. "They may feel motivated to keep working on themselves."

Aspiring actress Jenell DiLeonardo, 18, definitely wants to. "I used pot, coke, prescription drugs, you name it. I didn't want to face it for a long time," she said, adding that she will finish high school in two months.

"For as long as it takes, I will continue working on myself," she said.

Kendall resident Caristina Carles, 17, said she went wild during middle school, taking up pot, booze and pills. "But I just got sick and tired of being sick and tired," she added. "Now I want to be a therapist and help people with mental illnesses."



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