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In tough economy, schools downsize homecoming dances

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Enlarge By Wilfredo Lee, AP

Desiree Banton, 16, poses in her homecoming dress at her home in Margate, Fla.

POMPANO BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Like girls sifting through dresses at Macy's, the teens milled through aisles of sparkling pastel- and florescent-hued homecoming gowns, stepping into dressing rooms to try them on and then modeling them before their mothers.

But it wasn't Macy's. The girls were at a South Florida flea market where the charity Becca's Closet gives used and new gowns to high school students unable to afford one. One mom said her hours as a nurse's aide had been cut. Another whose mortgage payment had increased said she felt humiliated to ask for help.

"I heard money was really tight, especially in our household," said Desiree Banton, a 16-year-old who attends a technical school and was trying on peach, lime green and bright blue gowns. "And my birthday is around the same week, so I knew it was gonna be really difficult to get everything done for homecoming."

Because of the economic downturn, the homecoming dance, that rite of passage that has become increasingly extravagant in recent years, is being scaled back at many high schools nationwide.

Teens accustomed to spending hundreds on dresses and suits, a pricey dinner and limousine ride are now making their own decorations, soliciting donations for food and gowns and, in some cases, reconsidering the ritzy ballroom in favor of the gym.

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Becca's Closet, with chapters around the country, and similar charities say they are seeing more families this year who previously could afford the expense. Volunteers at its flagship branch in Broward County, where families have been particularly hard hit by the housing crisis, say they have been flooded with twice the dress requests.

"We're seeing people who, you know, wouldn't typically be needing help," said Pam Kirtman, who runs the group with her husband in memory of their daughter, who was killed in a 2003 car accident when she was 16.

The budget squeezing comes at a time when homecoming dances have been growing, and teen parties in general — from proms to sweet 16s — are more elaborate: Recent homecomings have been in hotels instead of the school gym, and ticket prices have hit \$50.

"Homecoming is definitely growing each year," said Jacquie Downey, a business director at Stumps Spirit, an Indiana-based party supply company.

Rather than just a football game and dance, the entire community is becoming involved, and the school has special activities every day of the week.

But this year, celebrations are shaping up differently.

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Stumps Spirits, which sells homecoming and prom supplies to schools across the country, says students are shopping for the best sale, using their own art department to help with decorations and skipping the party planner.

"It's definitely a tighter budget," Downey said.

Emily Petway, a high school band director who runs a Becca's Closet chapter outside Atlanta, said she's been visited by students she didn't know were struggling. Their parents whisper, "I've never done anything like this before."

"That story I've heard a lot," she said. "When a dress costs \$150 and you're having to choose between sending your senior daughter to prom and groceries, it's really hard."

At Tampa's Freedom High School, students spent \$40,000 renting a ballroom at the Embassy Suites hotel last year. This year, they rented an exhibit area at the city's Museum of Science and Industry for under \$15,000. They were able to reduce the ticket price from \$55 to \$40.

At nearby Jefferson High School, students saved \$10,000 by holding their dance at the school instead of the city's pro football stadium. They hired a disc jockey and provided purchased and donated food from area restaurants. Ticket prices were cut from \$50 a person to \$25.

Some students are opting out completely.

Hampton High School in Virginia canceled its homecoming dance because organizers couldn't sell enough \$7 tickets. Principal Myra Chambers said to break even about 350 to 400 of the school's 1,600 students had to attend — a number that hasn't been difficult to reach in years past. This year, only about 95 students bought.

"A dance is a lot more than just a ticket. It may be an evening out, a dress or a suit," Chambers said.

Photographers are feeling the pinch, too. Robert Garcia, who runs a photography business in Pleasanton, Calif., said the number of students buying homecoming packages is down sharply. At one school last year, he received 400 orders; this year, there were just 125. (Digital technology is likely behind the drop, too, he said.)

Not all schools are cutting back. Cindy Bader, vice president of the California Association of Directors of Activities, said that at Terra Linda High School, where she works, ticket prices increased and attendance still went up. Students paid \$15 for pre-sale tickets and \$20 at the door.

"We're definitely a bit more conscious of the cost of things the class purchases for the dances," she said. "But other than that, we have not made any changes. We have never gone all out."

Desiree Banton, a high school sophomore, came to Becca's Closet's South Florida chapter with her mother and sister on a recent Sunday afternoon in search of a dress. Her mother, Lorna Dempster, said she is working a part-time and a full-time job to help make ends meet.

Banton tried on four different gowns before settling on a short, peach colored dress by Betsy Johnson.

"Things are really difficult," Dempster said. "I find myself leaning mostly on my credit cards, which I've been living off for almost a year now. And it's really tight."

"I don't want her to be disappointed."

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BugsySiegel wrote: 1d 10h ago
They spent \$40,000 renting a ballroom in Tampa last year?! No wonder the savings rate in this country is zero.

Maybe they can reduce sexua- intercourse, too, at these dances. There are far too many teenage pregnancies.

Nope, getting laid is part of the prom ritual too.
Girls rarely get pregnant if they have a Trojan Man.

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xnavygunner wrote: 11/22/2008 6:23:07 PM

A dance in the gym is good enough. These kids are just plain spoiled.

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BugsySiegel wrote: 11/21/2008 7:41:41 PM

They spent \$40,000 renting a ballroom in Tampa last year?! No wonder the savings rate in this country is zero.

Maybe they can reduce sexua- intercourse, too, at these dances. There are far too many teenage pregnancies.

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CompMan wrote: 11/21/2008 5:48:46 PM

jost wrote: 17h 24m ago
Because of the economic downturn, the homecoming dance.... is being scaled back at many high schools nationwide.

So, USAToday, you took this space to let us know about the tragedy of scaled down homecoming dances instead of, say, the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan? Or maybe an indepth look into the cause of our coming economic collapse or even ome new twist on Obama's early decisions influencing the future of the U.S and the world. No, homecoming dances it is. Nice work USAToday.

So, people should only get the news that you deem important?

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Back to the gym for homecoming dances! Put on some old LPs and have a ball!

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texas42 wrote: 11/21/2008 11:51:31 AM

horrible, horrible.

We need another government program.

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SisterMeg wrote: 11/21/2008 9:42:22 AM

atlmom2, I'm with you. And Jost & Cassandra8 lighten up a little. Unless these students know someone in Iraq or Afghanistan, they probably don't care about what caused them to have to go to a flea market for a dress. When you were 15-18, did you care about anything other than whether or not you were going to pass your classes & who was going out with whom?

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