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## Need a dress for prom? Here's your answer

By Christie Taylor / News Republic

Casey Carignan, a senior at Baraboo High School, knows firsthand that prom can be an expensive endeavor for girls wanting to make it a memorable night. Shoes alone can cost up to \$50, jewelry — earrings and a necklace at minimum — more than \$30, and professionally-styled hair and fingernails can each cost \$40. And even if you go bargain on dinner, there's still The Dress, which can ring in at more than \$350 in most cases, and sometimes over \$600.

"Afterwards, you're like, 'Whoa,' " Carignan said. "It all costs so much."

But, she says, the dance was something many of her classmates had been looking forward to for years, some even since kindergarten, and something even the most hard-up of her fellow students should experience.

"It's their chance to get all dressed up in that princess way and have their fairy-tale night," she said. "We want every girl to have the chance to have a perfect prom."

So this year, girls at Baraboo High School who are unable to afford the glitz and glamor of prom festivities will still have a chance to feel like a princess, thanks to a new project to provide free, gently-used dresses to students in need.

The program is part of a national project called "Becca's Closet," named for a Florida girl, Rebecca Kirtman, who single-handedly collected more than 250 dresses to be donated to students in her area, before she was killed at the age of 16 in a car accident in 2003.

Through the Baraboo chapter, students will have access to the dresses, and, while supplies last, shoes and other accessories, all donated by high school graduates or their parents, as well as students at UW-Baraboo/Sauk County.

Panache Academy of Beauty has also donated free hairdos and manicures, and Carignan said many other local businesses were chipping in as well. Maurice's had donated clothing racks, employee help, and even discount jewelry.

Spanish teacher Kristin Terry said she and another teacher, Emily Arendsee, had the idea to start a Baraboo chapter last year, after seeing a documentary about a similar program being run in Madison.

"We saw the need," she said. "We wanted to put spending in perspective."

"I'm not saying it's a bad thing to spend \$400 on a dress, but not everyone has that."

And Carignan, who has been working on the project as part of the school's Interact club, said while no one she knew had said directly that they couldn't afford prom this year, she knew the economy was getting tighter, and parents may be less able to help out than in the past.

"I know our economy has really been hit hard," she said. "A lot of my friends' parents have been laid off, and a \$500 dress, that's not in the budget."

In addition, Terry said, it was an environmentally friendly way for families to recycle dresses that had been worn only a few times by their own children.

The school has already collected more than 100 dresses, which are being stored in student's homes, and even Terry's Spanish classroom.

Carignan said the dresses were "a girl's dream," with plenty of tulle and that "princess" look. The sizes range from 2 to 16.

"Every girl will hopefully be able to find something," she said.

Girls interested in a dress will be able to "shop" on two days before the dance — March 20 and April 27, between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Terry said it would be best if girls called for appointments, so volunteers could ready dresses in the right sizes.

Students from UW-BSC have volunteered to help with the fittings, to ensure that program participants have full confidentiality, Terry said. And, she said, no one would be required to prove need.

"It doesn't matter what kind of car you drive or what part of town you live in, there's all kinds of need," she said. "You don't know where money is being spent, or what kind of family crisis they have.

"It takes a lot just to come forward and accept help."

The program has received donations of garment bags from Maurice's and JC Penney, but could still use more, Terry said, and would still welcome dresses "in good condition and current styles." Eventually, she said, they hoped to have a centralized space in a local business or church which they could use for storage and distribution.

Carignan said she was impressed by what support had been shown for the program so far.

"It's hard to put into words how helpful Baraboo is to the community," she said. "I've never seen anyone not willing to help."

To schedule a "shopping" appointment or for more information, call Terry at 608-355-3940, extension 2313, or Carignan at 393-3277.

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