

TIGHT TIMES FOR STUDENTS SOME CAN'T AFFORD PROMS, CLASS TRIPS

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Mallory Yohannan, 17, a color guard at Stoneman Douglas High School, spent the past three summers touring the country with a world-ranked drum corps.

"This year, my parents told me, 'We can't pay for it. We don't have the money,' " said Yohannan, of Coral Springs, who is now looking for sponsors and scholarships to raise \$2,400 for the trip. Although she earns \$7.25 an hour at a part-time job at Town Center mall in Boca Raton, that barely pays for her gas nowadays.

"My parents would help me if they could, but this year is really tight for them," she said.

Living in troubled times is giving teens a hard-knocks lesson in economics. Some kids in middle-income and working-class families are opting out of senior proms, class trips and travel tournaments. Their parents, battered by rising food and gas prices, home foreclosures or job losses, don't have the disposable dollars this year.

While missing a prom or other extracurricular activity isn't likely to hurt kids in the long run, experts say, some events being sacrificed, like a tour of colleges, could have an impact on their future.

"Fear over the economy is causing people to cut back," said Pan Yatrakis, professor of economics and finance at Nova Southeastern University in Davie. "Even people who are not in dire straits will cut back in fear they might find themselves in financial hardship.

"Some families would rather go without other things in order to give their kids [proms and trips.] But when it comes to necessities like gasoline and food, obviously the luxuries are going to go first."

In Riviera Beach, JFK Middle School recently canceled its annual eighth-grade class trip to an Orlando theme park because few families could afford it this year.

"The economy is the major factor," said Wondra Daniels, a juvenile probation officer whose daughter, Tiffany Wright, 14, was among those not going on the trip.

"A trip to Orlando is really not a priority. It's not essential for her growth and development," Daniels said. "Right now, that's money I can save for a seriously rainy day, which I can already foresee."

To motivate middle school students about their futures, the New Beginnings Beacon Center in Riviera Beach each year organizes a subsidized tour of colleges during Spring Break. The trip, which costs each student \$125, stops at Georgetown and Howard universities in Washington, D.C., and three other colleges in Virginia and Maryland.

This year, about 35 kids went on the trip, down from 60 last year. Director James Easley said financial hardships kept home about two dozen students.

Some struggling families seek a compromise by allowing a limited number of activities for their children.

Renae Felix, 18, had to choose between grad night or her senior prom at South Plantation High School. Her mother, struggling with rising food and gas costs and working a full-time job, couldn't help her pay for both this year.

Felix, who lives in Plantation, opted for the graduation trip. "I do mind missing prom, but it's one of the sacrifices you make," Felix said. "The financial situation is not good right now. My mom has a lot on her plate."

Naylynn and Monica Tanon will skip prom at Cypress Bay High School in Weston. Instead, the sisters, ages 17 and 15, will attend a military ball for their junior ROTC program.

The girls' parents, Olga Reyes and Luis Tanon, of Davie, lost their jobs this year. Olga is a teacher; Luis worked for a company that customizes private jets. For the first time, the family didn't have money for two gowns.

The girls will wear designer dresses from Becca's Closet, a Plantation-based charity that provides gowns to teens in need. Naylynn, 17, will wear a purple, full-length Vera Wang. Monica picked a red, strapless dress.

"It took such a big weight off our backs," Reyes said about the donated dresses for her daughters. "We were all stressed. We didn't know how we were going to get the money. I couldn't find it in my heart to not to let them go. I was ready to sell something."

To save money, Naylynn will enroll at Broward Community College next year, postponing plans to attend the University of Florida.

For some students, there are no options.

Shermeika Collins, 16, of Belle Glade, knows prom is out of the question this year. Her mother is struggling to make her car payment and pay her phone bill. A dress or new pair of shoes falls short on the priority list.

"She just can't help me this year," Collins said.

For the past two years, Felisha Snyder, 16, of Hollywood, has participated in an international kung fu martial arts competition in Orlando. With rising costs, she won't make the three-day trip this time.

"She would love to go, but this year I just can't do it," said Penny Snyder, a single mom of three who works in the auto-salvage business, hurt by the slump in car sales.

"The [martial arts] school has tried to do some fundraising," the mother said. "The problem is, nobody has the money right now."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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