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GRADUATION 2009

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Mariel D'Andrea, a sophomore at Father Ryan High School in Nashville, Tenn., operates the Becca's Closet charity from her house. Her family used to attend St. James Church in Falls Church before

Teen helps girls dress for the prom

She operates Becca's Closet charity from her home

NED ANDREW SOLOMON | CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Although Mariel D'Andrea's first high school prom is a year away, the Catholic high school sophomore has a closet full of prom dresses, shoes and make-up, and the necessary trappings for that special occasion.

Well actually, none of these items belong to her. They've been donated to D'Andrea's Becca's Closet initiative, a national program with local chapters that collects donated clothing, shoes and accessories and makes them available to girls who can't afford to buy them.

It all started three years ago, when D'Andrea's mom, Jo Ann, read the Ms. Cheap article in The Tennessean daily newspaper about a girl in Franklin, Caroline Davidson, who was collecting and giving away prom dresses through her own Becca's Closet chapter.

"We e-mailed her, and said we'd love to help out in any way we could," said D'Andrea, a student at Father Ryan High School in Nashville. "We didn't hear back from her. Then she e-mailed us, said she'd kept our e-mail and that she was graduating and wanted someone to pass this on to."

The D'Andrea family used to live in Falls Church, where the children attended St. Ann School. They moved to Franklin seven years ago, but still keep in touch with many friends in Virginia.

Becca's Closet originated in Davie, Fla., in 2002, when a high school freshman, Rebecca Kirtman, launched a drive to provide prom dresses to disadvantaged high school girls.

During the spring of her sophomore year, Kirtman single-handedly collected and donated more than 250 formal dresses throughout south Florida. Tragically, the 16-year-old Kirtman was killed in a car accident that same year, but her vision continues through other girls' efforts across the country.

"We thought it was a great thing that we'd like to get involved with, but we didn't know how much work it was going to be," D'Andrea told the *Tennessee Register*, newspaper of the Nashville Diocese. "We also didn't realize how many girls would be affected, and how many great people we would meet."

Davidson packed up all the dresses and shoes, and delivered them to the D'Andrea family. Jo Ann and Mariel unpacked them upstairs in their attic workout room.

Word about D'Andrea's effort has spread through people who come in for dresses and who donate them.

"It's kind of a touchy thing," she said. "Some girls may be embarrassed about needing a dress from us, so we try not to make it too public. And they know we're not going to judge anything. We're not here to judge, just to help."

Her "clients" visit from all over Tennessee and beyond, including many from Kentucky who are hoping to get a dress. They have to call or e-mail D'Andrea to set up an appointment. Her family tries to schedule those meetings two days a week, until about seven in the month. There's no financial eligibility to get a free dress; it's all on an honor system.

"I guess I always took for granted that everyone could afford a prom dress," said D'Andrea. "But many girls can't even afford their prom tickets. So we're helping them with a great deal."

For more info

Information about Becca's Closet is available on the organization's Web site, <http://www.beccascloset.com>.

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