



SPRING, 2009 PROM DRESSES

TAMPA-- As the school year comes to a close, thousands of local teenagers will be buzzing with excitement in preparation for prom.

The young women will dream of a magical night of romance, with the perfect dress and date. The young men will envision dinner and an uncomfortable tuxedo, with too many pictures taken.

Although many students will hand over their parents' credit card to pay for the entire event, there are many in the Tampa area that are less fortunate and rely on charities to provide the night of their dreams.

There are two local organizations that make teenagers' dreams come true by collecting special occasion dresses and shoes and bringing in makeup and hair stylists to prepare girls for their big night.

Reaching Tampa is the main service organization for which the college ministry of Idlewild Baptist Church volunteers. In the year or so since their homecoming and prom dress collection campaigns started, Reaching Tampa has collected approximately 300 dresses and 50 pairs of shoes.

Courtney Greer is a member of Idlewild and began the campaigns for foster care children in August of 2008. After hearing about the staggering number of children in foster homes who

are not privileged enough to enjoy things like homecoming and prom, Greer said she decided to do something.

“These kids don’t get any money for any extracurricular items such as school photos, sports, ballet, etc.,” Greer said.

“The only way they get any of these ‘extras’ is if the foster parents decide to provide them out of pocket,” she said.

Another young woman who saw a need to do something is Caitlin Brunell, of Jacksonville, Fla.

Brunell’s parents started The Brunell Family Foundation in 1997, when she was very young. Brunell actively participated in charity work through the foundation and decided in 2006 to initiate her own program, Caitlin’s Closet.

Because Brunell participates in beauty pageants across the state and country, the exposure for Caitlin’s Closet has been incredible. In just three years, her organization has collected over 6,000 dresses to serve the young women in her community.

Through various public relations contacts and Brunell’s hard work, she was able to outfit members of the Boys and Girls Club of America to attend January’s inaugural balls in Washington, D.C.

Alanna Orr, a family friend and volunteer for Caitlin’s Closet is excited about the progress of the organization.

“Others can get involved too,” Orr said.

“Caitlin’s Closet enthusiastically welcomes donations from individuals, schools, clubs, youth groups, retail stores, manufacturers... if you have dresses in new or lightly worn condition, Caitlin’s Closet is eager to match them up with young ladies in need!” she said.

Amanda Varner is also excited to help with the prom collection campaign. A member of Idlewild Baptist Church, Varner has not yet volunteered with Reaching Tampa in this capacity.

Varner helped campaign in the fall and inspired her sorority at USF to collect dresses they no longer needed. She also invited Greer to come to a council meeting to speak to the eight sororities in the Panhellenic Association about donating their dresses as well.

She explained that many think of prom as a right, not a privilege.

“We tend to not even give prom a second thought: buy the shoes, dress, ticket, get the hair, nails, and makeup done. But for some, there isn't even a starting point,” Varner said.

“Prom is something special that only comes around once in a lifetime. I think that this is a great opportunity to give that feeling to someone who never dreamed it possible,” she said.

To donate or learn more about Reaching Tampa, visit the organization's Web site at http://www.reachingtampa.org/foster_care_donors. To learn more or donate to Caitlin's Closet, visit the foundation's Web site at <http://www.caitlinscloset.org>.