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Neal Rubin

Priceless prom dresses: It's Hope Closet to the rescue for teens in need



It's almost unfair to start with Whitney Drake's favorite story, because fortunately, this has only happened once. But with a moving van full of fashion ready to roll out tonight, it's fresh on her mind.

Drake, 37, has been the fairy godmother of free prom dresses since 2002. Hope Closet, the charity Oprah Winfrey inspired her to co-found, has sent more than 4,000 girls to dances feeling proud and pretty.


A girl who came in with her mom two years ago, though, wasn't going to make it to the celebration. "She was dying," Drake says, "and she was too sick." Picking out a dress at least made her feel normal for the moment — and that's not a bad way to think of the entire program. Its job is to make high school girls feel normal.

Unlike other rites of passage like graduation and finding out on Facebook that you've been dumped, prom comes at a price. Even in boom times, plenty of families can't afford \$200 for a dress with limited practical application the other 364 nights of the year.


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For the cost of a few gallons of gas or even a bus ticket, the annual Hope Closet Boutique in Royal Oak has fit girls from as far away as


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Brighton. "They hold their shoulders up a little higher," Drake says, "and walk a little taller" — which may or may not be because they can also select shoes.

Always room for more

Hope Closet does not have the exclusive franchise on distributing dresses. WDZH-FM (98.7), for instance, has collected more than 200 and will give them away from noon-4 p.m. Sunday at the Aveda Institute, 409 S. Center St., Royal Oak.

Drake, who operates with a minimal budget and an even smaller ego, welcomes all competitors and has even donated inventory to get other groups started. But she and a swarm of volunteers will be hanging more than 3,000 dresses Friday in the ever-fashionable basement of Royal Oak First United Methodist Church, on Seventh Street at Lafayette.

As in business, size has its advantages. Hope Closet can either scavenge the material from truly ghastly dresses and use it for scarves, or deposit the worst offenders directly into a Dumpster.

Drake's advice for potential donors is, "Ask yourself if someone would wear it today." A poufy bridesmaid dress you were embarrassed to be seen in 30 years ago probably won't qualify.

Hope Closet operates on the honor system. Showing up to pick out a free dress means you qualify to get one. The fine print is brief, but important: To keep things orderly, appointments are mandatory, and so is a report card or a student I.D.

For an appointment, call (248) 347-1309. The boutique will be open Saturday through April 9. Then the leftover dresses will go back in the enormous wooden shipping containers to await the next prom season.

Inspired by Oprah

Drake lives in Livonia and works in social media for Chevrolet. She became a 100-percent-off dress dealer after catching an Oprah segment about a similar group in Chicago, going online, and finding three other people who also thought it sounded like a swell idea. One of them, Emily Baker of Huntington Woods, is still involved, as are a handful of incredibly helpful corporations.

In the old days, it took 30 car trips to transport the dresses from a storage bin to the church. Now Premier Relocations, a Mayflower outlet in Novi, stores three 8-by-7-by-5-foot wooden crates of dresses, two crates of racks and fixtures and a crate of accessories and shoes, and hauls them to the site. Premier is also the year-round dress drop, which leads to some double takes: "I brought prom dresses. Am I in the right place?"

The Hope Closet team will offload the truck tonight, set things up Friday and start making memories the next morning.

Incredible as it seems, Drake says, some of the girls have never worn a dress before. She says the transformation when you get them out of jeans and hoodies would be worth triple the price — if, of course, there was one.

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