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Lifestyle

Hope Closet provides formal dresses for area youth in Royal Oak



Hope Closet Submitted photo

By Jeanne Towar, Special to Digital First Media

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Emily Baker (left) vice president of Hope Closet and Whitney Drake, founder and president of Hope Closet. Submitted photo

Emily Baker married her Royal Oak High School senior prom date, Chris, 13 years ago, and now she helps other girls look beautiful for their special occasions.

Baker is vice-president of Hope Closet, a nonprofit organization that provides free formal dresses and accessories for high school students from anywhere in Michigan to wear to special events.

“We started out small 12 years ago,” said Baker, who is referred to as Number Two by other volunteers. “Other than this 10 days of sequins, I’m a pretty ordinary working mom. The very first year I showed up with all my bridesmaid’s dresses.”

“We now have the capability to meet and dress 700 young people at our boutique in one week. About 5,000 kids have gone to their prom in one of our dresses and accessories.”

This year the Hope Closet boutique will be open in the basement of First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, 320 W. 7th Street, from Saturday, April 18 through Saturday, April 25, after school on weekdays, all day Saturdays and after church on Sunday.

The special dress and one accessory – shoes, purses, jewelry, wraps — are absolutely free. All that is required is proof of enrollment in a Michigan high school.

Students must make an appointment by calling 248-347-1309 between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. Then they must bring a valid school ID card, or other proof of current enrollment, like a report card or letter from a teacher, to their appointment.

“They will get a private dressing room, a personal shopper and be spoiled with better than top-of-the-line customer service,” Baker said. “I personally look at every one of the dresses, and if it’s not perfect, I’ll remove it. I want every kid to look like they are my own kid.”

Baker’s own child, Eleanor, is 7. “She’s been volunteering since she was in the playpen,” Baker said. “She thinks everyone should have a pink prom dress.”

“We try to keep the styles fresh and current. New donations come in all year long, so we’re constantly updating. Income doesn’t matter – it’s a reward for school. We have the capacity to be helpful and we do not turn anyone away who is in school, including home schoolers.”

To keep the dresses nice, they go home in a plastic dress bag, which can also be used to store the gown.

It takes more than 250 volunteers to make Hope Closet work and most have served more than five years. “You end up in the sequins and you can’t leave,” Baker said.

Two of those volunteers are Baker’s father-in-law and mother-in-law, Bruce and Kathy Baker, who have purchased about 20 dresses so far this year. Last year Kathy bought about 150 sets of costume jewelry to donate to Hope Closet.

“I saw the need and how these girls light up when they see the dresses,” said Kathy, who shops sales and uses coupons to save money. “If there’s a need and there’s something you can do about it, I like to get involved.

“We are also incredibly blessed by having a moving company – Premier Relocations – a Mayflower franchise in Novi, that donates trucking and year round storage,” Baker said. “They saw media coverage of our boutique and offered any help they could. For six years now, they have provided trucking to and from the boutique and climate controlled storage for more than 3,000 dresses.”

Hope Closet also gives about 500 dresses a year to alternative schools and youth service organizations such as Covenant House and Vista Maria.

“We have endless resources for one week,” Baker said.

“Then, to save our marriages, the trucks have to leave.”

Have news about your club, organization or interesting individuals in Southeast Oakland County you would like to share with the community? Email Jeanne Towar at jeanne.towar@gmail.com or call 248-890-8370.