

## Every girl deserves a slipper that fits

### And aid groups help them afford their prom dresses

**Nathalie Atkinson**

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Sitting back to watch the annual parade of wretched excess that is the modern prom phenomenon -- the thousand-dollar dresses, stilettos, hotel suites and stretch Hummer limousines -- it's easy to feel cynical about this one-night blowout. But there's another side to the annual rite of passage popularized by the haves: the many have-nots. It's *Pretty In Pink* all over again.

For them, there are grassroots organizations that use prom as a tool to help build self-esteem in girls who need it most. Referred to by their social worker or guidance counsellor, they're from underprivileged homes, in foster care or other difficult situations and wouldn't otherwise have the means to attend their prom. There's Cinderella Project in B.C., Toronto's Corsage Project (with which I'm a volunteer), The Fairy Godmother Foundation in Edmonton, and other groups like them from Hamilton to Truro, N.S., with names that are variations on the fairy-tale theme, such as Magic Wand Foundation.

Their goal is simple: to provide formal gowns and accessories like shoes, jewellery and wraps, free of charge. Individual donations help defray the cost of prom dinner tickets as well as purchase clothing items they don't manage to fundraise throughout the year (it's especially difficult to get companies to donate new shoes).

Imagine the awkwardness of teenage years, amplified. Then imagine 200 lucky Cinderellas let loose on pretty dresses for a day. It's the stuff of fairy-tales.

I spent a weekend last month helping the Corsage Project put together their annual Boutique Ball. In an amusing twist, I made like a publicist and spent a Saturday morning stuffing goody bags with cosmetics from donors such as Dove, Benefit, Rimmel, Smashbox and Biotherm, and an afternoon sorting hundreds of dresses by size, then colour, onto racks. Like the girls they're intended for, they came in all shapes, styles and sizes -- from kicky frocks from Le Chateau and Fashion Crimes to larger Linda Lundstrom gowns to sample size Wayne Clark. The volunteers at these non-profits are tireless and collect cash and donations in kind all year long in preparation for this one special day. The corporations who donate don't do it for the media attention, since to respect the girls' privacy, no press, photography or TV cameras are allowed to attend the boutique events themselves. On the day of the boutique ball itself, we were about 200 volunteers, including making artists, hair stylists, seamstresses and general helpers. I was assigned to be a personal shopper. After introductions and armed with an empty shopping bag, I spent about an hour with each girl -- first working our way through the racks to find a dress. In the huge change room, I helped each shimmy in and out of at least a dozen dresses until she settled on "the one," then found the right shoes, jewellery and accessories from the makeshift boutique areas set up for the donated goods in the main room.

There was Jennifer, who glowed in a cobalt blue jersey halter-neck; Mary, who chose an understated floor-length navy dress and matching wrap; and Laila, a statuesque brunette who scored a stunning silk charmeuse and chiffon gown that transformed her into Halle



CREDIT: Annie Leibowitz, Reuters, Walt Disney Co.

Scarlett Johansson has had many special nights, including this one recently when she posed for Disney as part of their 'When Dreams Come True' advertising campaign. Grassroots groups such as Cinderella Project in B.C. help many disadvantaged high school girls enjoy their special night: prom.

Berry in Elie Saab.

Genny Iannucci, the public relations manager for Laura Canada and a founding donor of the Corsage Project, was on-site too, dispensing advice and consulting. Laura, Laura Petites, Laura Plus and Melanie Lyne donate about 60 new dresses to various prom charities across Canada each year.

"When we were introduced to the whole concept, we just felt that it was a wonderful way for us to give back to the community," says Iannucci.

At the end of the day, I was given a Royal Doulton figurine for my time. I don't usually go in for collectibles, but this one is symbolic: It's the impish Fairy Godmother from Cinderella, wrapped in her mauve cloak and waving her magic wand. Perched within eyesight on my desk as I write about fabulous frocks and other interesting things, it's a gentle reminder of the power of bibbity, bobbity, boo. - For corporate or individual donations, please visit [thecinderellaproject.com](http://thecinderellaproject.com), [corsageproject.ca](http://corsageproject.ca) or your local fairy-tale granting organization.

In this Saturday's Weekend Post, we check in on high-school students from coast to coast as they prepare for prom.

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