

Like genies granting wishes

Dry cleaner workers put in long hours prepping dresses for a prom giveaway

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For prom this season, hundreds of teen girls from the Chicago area will have fairy godmothers, or godfathers, smiling at them from afar.

These are the people who toiled and sweated for five weeks over donated prom and evening dresses at Zengeler Cleaners in Northbrook to benefit the Glass Slipper Project, which also collects donated shoes, handbags, pantyhose and unopened makeup for girls who cannot afford them.

Last week alone the workers, mostly Latino immigrants, put in 247 hours of overtime washing, pressing, hanging and packaging fancy dresses. Some gowns had designer labels, like Vera Wang. There also were Stuart Weitzman shoes and Kate Spade purses.

With the utmost care, Fernando Ocampo sorted the dresses, all with a "special handling" label on them, before putting them into the green industrial-size washers on the first floor.

"These are donated dresses, but the people who are going to wear them deserve to wear something very pretty," Ocampo said in Spanish.

Zengeler's is the project's largest sponsor, and this is the fourth year the suburban dry cleaning chain, established almost 150 years ago, has helped out. The first year, as a favor to a customer, it cleaned 60 dresses for free and the number has grown until this year when the store cleaned 2,109 dresses.

The work goes beyond washing and pressing.

Jim Nutini, an assistant manager, spent Saturday pairing about 250 shoes. A \$79 pair of sparkly brown stilettos from Von Maur had been marked down to \$39. But the lucky girl whose foot can easily slip into the shoe will get a pair for free.

Within the many racks of satin, sequins and lace, some dresses attracted more attention. The safari prints and a frilly pink floor-length number with massive puffed sleeves, a bow in the back and ruffles along the bottom, stood out. On the second floor where the ironing takes place, Castula "Caty" Vergara, a 27-year employee, said some days the entire room was filled with gowns. Pressure mounted to complete them by the pickup date, and it could take 10 minutes to more than an hour to complete the work on each.

Vergara said she admired the donors, some who gave gowns with price tags still attached.

A girl always dreams of her prom or graduation dress, Vergara said in Spanish.

"Que lindo!" she said, which means "How pretty!"

"The girls will feel happy."

Fernanda Estela, the plant manager, agreed, saying, "We all want our daughters to wear a beautiful dress like this."

For the last two weekends, almost 300 volunteers have been setting up shop at the former Truth Elementary School, 1409 N. Ogden Ave., in Chicago, where about 2,000 dresses already hang. The rest from Zengeler's will arrive soon.

Three floors resemble a fancy boutique, with organization a priority. One former classroom is now a 0-4 size room with dresses organized by color. There are rooms set aside for just shoes and dressing rooms.

Because dresses are given out on a first-come, first-served basis, some girls choose to spend the night in their cars before the boutique opens so they are first in line at 9 a.m. Only 600 are allowed in on each of the three shopping days.

The teens get their own personal shoppers.

Dorian Carter, a co-founder, said it's a long process. Last year, 1,700 girls showed up, some from Indiana and Wisconsin. Carter hopes to break the 1,800 mark this year.

The beginning was far different, with only about 20 girls showing up. There were more than 100 dresses.

"We were devastated," Carter said. "We thought this was a great idea, but other people didn't. We actually had some of the girls take two dresses that day."

Then Oprah Winfrey's people called. The following weekend, police had to be called in for crowd control.

"We were kicking ourselves because we had let girls take two dresses [the weekend before]," said Carter, of Chicago. "We had very little of anything."

The boutique will be open April 22, 29 and May 6 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Junior and senior girls are admitted with a high school identification card and are allowed to bring a parent or guardian.

Donations, especially plus-size prom dresses, still are being accepted. For information, log on to www.glassslipperproject.org.