

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Group makes the prom a reality for those who might have missed out

March 15, 2009 | Esmeralda Bermudez

Libby Soto pulls back the black curtain of her dressing room, timidly steps up to her reflection in the wall-sized mirror, and the girls around her gasp.

"It's stunning!"

"That dress was made for you."

Fair-skinned with rosy cheeks, the slender 17-year-old from Cantwell Sacred Heart of Mary High School in Montebello glows in a black silk gown that twinkles with sequins. On a day when 100 girls tried on nearly 1,000 prom dresses in search of the perfect one, this is the first one Libby tried on. But she is convinced: This is the one.

"I was amazed," Libby said. "I was ready to buy a cheap, simple dress, and then I came here and found this one."

For six hours on Saturday, teenage girls from across the county poured into Cal State Dominguez Hills in Carson as L.A.'s Prom Closet, a local nonprofit, transformed a conference hall into a giant fitting room overflowing with donated formal dresses. Tulle, taffeta, polyester and lace a riot of color, in every shape and size. Sparkly heels and jewelry too. And all free.

Like Soto, who felt guilty asking her struggling mother for money to buy a dress, many of the girls waiting anxiously in line thought they would have to miss their proms because of the sour economy. Then they heard about the program, started by a group of college sorority sisters a year ago. School counselors recommended girls to program organizers, and seniors applied by submitting a 50-word note about why they want a dress.

"We received the most heartfelt stories," organizer Mary Jo Salcido said. "There are all kinds of girls: Girls who were raised in foster homes, who have been through a lot, and this will give them a chance to feel special."

Throughout the day, the girls are pampered and groomed in every way. They are escorted to dressing rooms and assisted by personal shoppers. After they pick the perfect dress, they are dolled up with jewels and shoes. Seamstresses are on hand to adjust waistlines and hemlines. In the background, a disc jockey plays hip-hop to relax their nerves.

A series of workshops await in a separate room. The girls talk to motivational speakers about life goals, learn about makeup and take an etiquette crash course in which they are reminded not to slouch or talk with food in their mouths.

Then, Daisy Pollard, a former Miss Jamaica International, rounds up the young women for some dress-talk. She teaches them how to walk in their gowns, turn, and enter and exit a car.

"You all have heard those horror stories about the girl who walks out of the bathroom with her dress caught in her pantyhose," Pollard tells the girls, making them giggle. "We don't want to see that happen to you."

One month shy of her big day, Marlin Ibarra asks an important question. She wants to ask a boy to be her date. "But how?"

Pollard advises her to go for what she wants and to do it in person, not online as so many teenagers do nowadays.

Cindy Trochez, 17, isn't too concerned about finding a date. All she wanted was a beautiful dress and now she has one. "I might just go alone," she says.

The senior from Lennox Academy, a charter high school, is the oldest of eight children, all raised by a single mother. "It's really been hard," she says. "I just want to look nice and enjoy my last year."

--

esmeralda.bermudez @latimes.com