

Prom 'N Aide Fashion Show

Guardian Angel Community Services (GACS) and the Joliet Public Library may not be fairy godmothers, but every March we come as close as we can.

For the past three years, we have co-hosted a prom fashion show for local area teens. While fashion shows are nothing new to libraries, ours has a little twist. Teens who participate in a two-hour dating safety course are given a free dress or prom accessories, thanks to GACS' program called Prom 'N Aide. The fashion show is used as a way to highlight dresses that the girls may pick.

GETTING STARTED

While GACS created the Prom 'N Aide program almost seven years ago, our partnership didn't start until three years ago. Looking for teen programming that was a bit outside the box, I decided to host a fashion show. I explored several different options, including partnering with local mall stores and consignment stores for a back-to-school fashion show, but it wasn't until I discovered Prom 'N Aide that I knew I'd found my match. The girls would have a blast as models, and they would gain an important foundation on healthy relationships.

Starting the partnership was the easiest step in the process. Although GACS had been doing their own fashion show for two years, they were happy to make it a joint project. Our branch offered a beautiful location with three meeting rooms that connect to make one larger room. We also offered to have our staff build a runway. Measuring three feet high and forty feet long, the

runway gave the show something extra special.

During our first meeting, my co-host Jenni and I were able to decide on the basics. We would hold the show after-hours on a Saturday evening. Our goal was to have thirty to forty local high school teens each model one dress during the show. The girls would walk the runway alone or be escorted by a teen male model. Fliers would be distributed at the library, GACS, and local schools. With the essentials decided, it was time to get the ball rolling.

PREPARATIONS

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work that goes into the fashion show. Not only do we search for volunteers who can help with hair, makeup, and set up, but we also have to arrange days for girls to try on dresses. The shopping days are held two different Saturdays for four hours each time. Model sign-ups are done via the library and GACS. A shared Google spreadsheet is used to keep track of time slots. We usually overbook because there are always a few girls who cancel at the last moment.

On the shopping day, girls are able to choose from over seven hundred dresses that have been donated by the community. Arranged by size, the teens are given a "personal shopper" to help them pick out a dress. The goal is to have the girls in and out within an hour, but this is not always possible. Some girls have a tough time deciding which dress they like the most, while other girls struggle to find just one. The plus-size dresses have the smallest selection and are harder to find. It's always fun to see girls fall in love with dresses they never imagined they would like. In three years, every girl has found a dress they liked, even the picky ones! If the girls want to keep the dresses, they must attend a dating safety class at GACS. Before they leave the shopping day, teens sign up for a class and decide if they would like the volunteers to do their hair and makeup or if they'll do it themselves.

The next month is spent putting finishing touches on the show. This includes editing the program and signing up any last-minute volunteers or male models. Jenni also creates a soundtrack for the girls to walk to and works with companies to solicit donations of food or drinks that audience members can enjoy before the show or during the intermission.



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styling can be time-consuming so the girls come in two waves and are split between hair and makeup. All teens, including the males, are required to arrive an hour beforehand in order to perform one last walk through.

The prom fashion show normally runs for an hour. A local radio host emcees the show, announcing the teen's name, school, and hobbies. There is a small intermission when GACS staff members talk about the services they offer. A teen girl, from GACS support group, tells her story about sexual assault. Their stories are emotional and very moving, leaving few dry eyes among the two hundred audience members. The show ends with one last group walk, when the teens go out with their friends as a group and do silly walks or poses.

Of all the programs I do each year, the prom fashion show is my favorite.

Not only is it incredibly fun, but it is so beneficial to the girls. Many girls comment on how pretty they feel during the show, and for some, it's the first time they've felt that way. Parents also comment about how proud they are of their children who participate in the show and class. I love that girls can walk away from this program with higher self-esteem and armed with information about healthy relationships. I am glad this has become a tradition that we can continue for years to come. ■

THE DATING SAFETY CLASSES

The dating safety classes are completely handled by GACS. Each year, they have more than one hundred teens complete the class. The class is open to any teen in the community and not limited to those in the fashion show. Many girls invite their friends or boyfriends to come along and learn the valuable information that is given during the session. Boys are offered incentives to attend in the form of coupons for discounts on prom accessories or tuxedos.

During the two-hour class, teens are taught information that can be used well beyond prom night. It is an interactive session where teens are encouraged to ask questions as they talk about things such as the Wheel of Power and Control, the Dating Bill of Rights, how to tell if they are in an abusive relationship, and how to set boundaries. They discuss how seemingly innocent texts, such as a "miss you," can be manipulative if the intent is to make you feel guilty and, ultimately, control you.

Teens respond positively to the class every year. Many discover that behaviors they learned from parents may be controlling. For example, one teen boy didn't know it was wrong to look through his girlfriend's cell phone to see who she was calling because his own father did the same to his mother. He was intimidating his girlfriend without realizing it. The knowledge they encounter during these classes can be used for the rest of their lives in creating and maintaining healthy relationships.

THE SHOW

Every year, practice is held the night before the fashion show. At this point, we give the girls a walking order and learn if they want to walk alone or be escorted by a teen male model. It also gives them a chance to get a feel for the show. Many girls are nervous about the runway at first and practicing allows them to get comfortable walking on it in their dress and shoes.

The day of the show, girls start arriving five hours before the show to have hair and makeup done. Without fail, we always get amazing volunteers from the community who are willing to give up their day to pamper and make the girls feel beautiful. Hair

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