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Education Foundation of Niagara

Prom PROJECT NIAGARA

Story By PAUL FORSYTH | Photo By **STEVE HENSCHEL**

It's a rite of passage that is supposed to be a dreamy night, a once-in-a-lifetime event that young people will look back on warmly into their adult years or even as seniors.

But for many Niagara teens, going to the prom could be just that – a dream that they won't realize.

With many Niagara families having to make difficult decisions such as whether to pay the heating bill over putting food on the table, the ever-increasing cost of prom night for sons or daughters is simply out of reach.

But the tiny staff at the Education Foundation of Niagara are determined to make sure that teens across Niagara have the opportunity this year to go to their prom, whether their families are well off or not.

For the 10th straight year, the foundation is organizing the highly successful Prom Project Niagara, in which donated new or gently used clothing and accessories are put in the hands of kids who can boogie to their heart's desire at their school proms.

Nicole Smith, event/volunteer coordinator at the foundation that among other things helps students from struggling families with essentials such as winter clothes, eyeglasses and funding for field trips, said the cost of a girl's formal dress can easily top $400 now and the cost of shoes, suit and tie for boys can reach the same.

That's simply beyond the reach of many families.

"Every day we get a glimpse into the life of some of our struggling families – snapshots of the harsh reality of parents having to make some very difficult decisions like paying for rent or food or using duct tape to hold their child's shoes together until they can afford new ones," said Smith.

"It is heart-breaking knowing that some of our kids live in such conditions, but it is reality," she said. "(It's) a reality we work very hard to change, made possible through the help of caring donors."

The foundation collects high quality clothes, shoes and accessories and has kids do their own 'shopping' for free at three locations on Saturday, April 21 from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.: Beamsville Secondary School on Central Avenue, Fort Erie Elementary School on Central Avenue, and – new this year – the DSBN Academy on Louth Street in St. Catharines. Bus shuttles will also bring in kids from Niagara Falls and Welland. There are even free alteration services on-site by volunteers, as well as hairstyling vouchers.

The Prom Project started out modestly with about 25 teens the first year, but the event has seen its popularity soar year by year: in 2017 more than 500 were students were outfitted, said Smith.

The change in demeanor about the students in-between their arrival and leaving with their new formalwear is heart-warming, said Smith.

"They tend to be a little unsure when they arrive," she said. "With the help of our incredible volunteers they walk out incredibly happy with a new outfit under their arms. Their confidence level jumps to obvious pride.

"Prom Project is one way that we can affect a young person's life in a very positive way."

Smith said individuals and businesses donating clothing and accessories are helping to create lasting, cherished memories for kids.

"Graduation and prom are life-defining occasions for students and every student deserves to have their moment in the sun, no matter their financial restrictions," she said.

Major sponsors include presenting sponsor PenFinancial Credit Union, site sponsor Johnson Insurance, dresses and suits sponsor Pen Centre, and Royal LePage's Lisa Punch. There are also in-kind sponsors such as Mary Kay Cosmetics that provides makeup for girls and after-shave for boys, as well as local hairdressers, floral shops and drycleaners that provide coupons for hairstyling, corsages and boutonnieres, and free dry cleaning.

This year there is a pressing need for plus size dresses for girls, men's shoes in good condition, and men's suits and shirts, particularly smaller sizes.

There are 20 different drop-off locations for clothing and accessory donations.

For more information on Prom Project Niagara, visit http://efnniagara.dsbn.org/events/prom-project-niagara. **n**life