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The Bessie Morris Foundation: Making Prom Dreams Come True

By *CHICO C. NORWOOD*

LOS ANGELES—The high school prom has come a long way since the early 1900s when it was a simple tea dance where high school seniors wore their Sunday best. Today, the high school prom has grown into a \$2 billion a year industry with florists, dressmakers, tuxedo shops, limousine companies, hotels and country clubs enjoying enormous profits from April through June at the expense of high school seniors attending the first formal event of their lives.

Recently a New York teen spent more than \$1,000 on his prom. The cost included renting a Truckousine, an elongated pickup equipped with a Jacuzzi, two TVs, a VCR, a PlayStation, and room for 10. A local teen said her costs were spiraling up to more than \$800 for her dress, prom tickets, after-prom outfit, limousine and more.

With school pictures, class rings, caps and gowns, dues for every activity and prom-related costs, being a senior in high school these days can prove expensive especially for working class families.

For teens like Tiffane Bell whose mother is a single parent working as a customer service representative for a local bank, the prom costs can be overwhelming.

Bell said she has been looking forward to her high school prom since elementary school. "I was into the prom way back then. I was ahead of my time," she said. "The perfect prom is something I have been dreaming of since I was in the first grade. Getting all dressed up and having my own personal time to shine."

In March 2006, at age 15, Bell was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, cancer of the lymphatic system. Chemotherapy, radiation treatments, blood transfusions, daily doctor visits and costly medications strained the family budget. In addition, Bell's sister was in her senior year of college.

"My mom was struggling and my illness made it worst," Bell said.

Realizing that Bell might not realize her dream of a perfect prom, a friend sent her a flier from The Bessie Morris Foundation, an organization that provides financial assistance to low-income high school girls to attend their high school proms. Through its Prom Dreams Program the foundation purchases prom dresses, shoes, accessories, make-up, hairstyling, manicures, pedicures, transportation, prom tickets and prom pictures.

"My mom and I would not have been able to afford for me to go to the prom (without the foundation)," Bell said. "I was not financially able. I did not have the money to do all those things."

Bell was one of seven girls chosen this year to receive assistance from the foundation. The organization received 37 applications from high schools throughout Los Angeles County. The girls were taken to the JC Penney department store in Northridge where manager Dave Senecal donated make-up and hair services and allowed the foundation to purchase dresses and shoes at half price. Ron Williams of Ron's Limousines donated limousine service to the prom, and Disneyland donated tickets for the girls to take an excursion to the popular amusement park.

Ivory Freeman, founder and executive director of the foundation, said she started the Prom Dreams Program



GETTING READY FOR THE PROM—The Bessie Morris Foundation is making prom dreams come true for disadvantaged young girls living in Los Angeles county. Here officials of the Bessie Morris Foundation along with "Prom Dream" winners take time from shopping to capture a few memories on film. (l-r): Lauren Holmes, Sandra Haywood, Krystal Huff, Velma McClinton, J.C. Penney Store Manager Dave Senecal, BMF Executive Director Ivory Free and Theresa Shaw.

because she knows first hand how it feels to want to go to the prom and not have the means.

“I couldn’t afford my prom. My grandmother raised all seven of us after raising her own kids. She was providing the necessities. How do you go to someone that’s providing the necessities and you know is struggling and tell them you need all of this money to go to a prom? You don’t want to sound ungrateful when you know you’re barely making it,” Freeman said.

“My aunt bought my prom dress and relatives and people in the neighborhood helped me. It took a village to pay for my prom,” she said.

Founded in 2005 in honor of Freeman’s grandmother, Bessie Bernice Morris, the Bessie Morris Foundation is dedicated to inspiring young women to realize their dreams by emphasizing the importance of academic performance, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-sufficiency. The foundation also offers leadership development training, health education, mentoring, personal development and character building programs to at-risk, underprivileged high school girls.

The foundation is run entirely on donations. One of the biggest contributors and supporters of the foundation has been the Brotherhood Crusade.

“We gave them their first grant,” said Brotherhood Crusade Executive Director Cherise Bremond. “This organization is looking at encouraging our young leaders to be able to feel good about themselves and empowering young women at a very young age where self-esteem is so vital. I know when I went to my prom how that made me feel. So it was a perfect fit to help a foundation that’s doing exceptional work around young women.”

In addition to the Prom Dreams Program, the foundation holds a Goodbye Before College Event, the Bessie Morris Foundation Reach for the Stars Young Ladies Self-Esteem Conference, and a Day of Giving Back to the Community event. Freeman says they also plan to host a health fair and an event to focus on HIV/AIDS.

All applicants for the Prom Dreams Program are required to submit an essay letter, a letter of recommendation from their teacher or high school counselor and high school transcripts. To qualify, the applicant must maintain a "C" average or better and meet low-income criteria. The foundation will begin accepting applications for the Prom Dream program in October.

For more information call (323) 753-5003 or visit the website at www.bessiemorris.org.

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