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A high school rite of passage, it's PROM SEASON

By ALICE POPOVICI/The Daily News



ALL IN A ROW: Parents snap photos of the girls before they leave on their bus to prom April 14. JEFF MANGUM/The Daily News

BULLHEAD CITY - A strobe light danced in the darkness of the Laughlin Ranch banquet room, illuminating the anxious faces of the 10 contenders for River Valley High School prom king and queen.

Gathered around them, promgoers in sparkling dresses and tuxedos waited in anticipation. Above their heads bobbed pink, blue and white balloons interspersed with paper stars suspended from the ceiling.

Out of the envelope came the first name - Zeke Hebbert - crowned prom king to a round of cheering and applause.

Then, a brief hush of silence.

Preparation

For many of the seniors, the momentum started to build long before April 14.

There were dates to secure, outfits to buy and dinner reservations to make.

High schoolers looking for the perfect prom outfit started shopping as early as January, according to Party Pizzaz manager Alice Lozoya.

With satin, organza, chiffon and crinoline dresses available in a kaleidoscope of colors, she said some girls tried on more than 10 dresses before making a decision.

"These are good - the poofy ones - they like the big Cinderella type (dresses)," she said, pointing to a rack of colorful gowns.

A portrait

Ana Alvarez knew what she was looking for: a ball gown with a corset top and a skirt that flowed out. She also wanted it to sparkle and to go along with the theme of the prom, "Diamonds are Forever."

The 17-year-old prom queen nominee said she had already traveled to Las Vegas and Lake Havasu City twice and to Phoenix once, but with no luck.

"I can't find that dream dress," Alvarez said. "My mom says I need to be less picky and just try something on."

She said she had been surprised when she heard she was chosen for prom court.

"I honestly was really shocked Š 'cause usually the same people get picked every year."

But she wasn't stressed about the possibility of winning the crown.

"I was fortunate enough to be nominated Š so that's good enough for me."

Alvarez said she stays busy between schoolwork, the student council, the Key Club, the Physics Club and the National Honors Society, not to mention preparing for her upcoming graduation. She just started her first after-school job, as a receptionist for Mohave County Women Infants and Children in Bullhead City.

Asked how friends would describe her, she thought for a moment.

“Funny,” she said. Smart, and also random, she added, smiling.

Alvarez spends her free time with friends, going bowling, going to the river or watching a late night movie at the Avi Resort & Casino.

Though she hasn't yet decided what she's doing after graduation, she said she's been accepted to Northern Arizona University. She eventually wants to attend medical school and become a pediatrician.

Like many other high school seniors, Alvarez said she was at the same time excited and nervous about graduation.

But in the week leading up to prom there was one, more pressing, concern: Finding the perfect prom gown.

With the big night quickly drawing near and no dress, Alvarez and her mother headed to Fantazia Bridal Boutique in Las Vegas the day before prom. After months of browsing and deciding, the time had come to buy the dress.

For Alvarez, one dress stood out: a strapless sequined dark blue organza layered on top of a pink satin skirt.

“I figured it's a once in a (lifetime) thing ... so might as well go with something unique,” she said.

Pre-party

Several hours before the prom, Jessica Wheaton's residence in Fort Mojave was a frenzy of activity as students and their parents gathered for the pre-party.

Girls rushed around, applying makeup and adding finishing touches to their ensembles. Dressed in tuxedos, the boys congregated in the living room. The party bus, an oversized limousine they had rented from Las Vegas, waited outside the house.

Wheaton, 17, was running late. Her white sequined dress sat on the bed as she curled her hair with a curling iron and chatted with friend Cassie Szuck, 17.

While many girls had spent months searching for the perfect outfit, the boys' preparation for the night had not been nearly as time consuming, though many matched their ties or vests to the color of their dates' dresses.

Many parents said they couldn't believe how grown-up their children looked as they gathered outside the house to snap photographs in front of the limousine.

Carol Knust said she was excited and happy for her son Ryan, one of the prom king nominees.

“It's like their last big dance before they graduate,” she said.

Laughlin Ranch, 9:30 p.m.

Cheering erupted from the audience as Alvarez was named prom queen. The balloons descended on the room as students crowded around the king and queen. Then music.

“My heart was beating really fast ... I didn't expect it at all,” Alvarez said, wearing her sash and crown.

But a group of students dancing in the middle of the banquet room said they knew exactly why Alvarez and Hebbert were picked.

“Everyone is tired of the whole popularity contest,” said Kara Keller, 17, but Alvarez and Hebbert are genuine, and always willing to lend a hand.

“Ana's, like, one of the nicest girls in the whole school ... and she's gorgeous,” said Amanda Bornschen, 16. “And Zeke got chosen because he's the best kid in the whole world.”

“They're popular because they're nice to everybody,” she added. “And that's the way it should be.”