

# The Journal Times

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## Local News

### Free prom dresses make for hot items at Belle of the Ball give-away

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**RACINE** — Sometimes a hand-me-down makes all the sense in the world.

It did to nearly 100 local high school girls, juniors and seniors, who did their prom-dress shopping this weekend by not shopping. Instead they browsed the selection of about 240 dresses at Belle of the Ball, a program that recycles “gently used” prom dresses.

For the fourth year, donated prom dresses were offered free to any girl who wanted one. They were on display Friday and Saturday at Wheaton Franciscan-All Saints Hospital.

Of the 98 girls who looked, only about five walked away empty-handed, said Belle of the Ball founder and coordinator Krystyna Sarrazin. Those cases were mainly a matter of not finding a good fit, particularly in the largest sizes.

But most girls, like Park High School junior Nicole Layman, found a dress they liked. “They had a lot of pretty dresses,” she said, and Layman found one in blue, as she’d wanted.

Layman said she’s been doing chores at home to earn money, but only has about \$100 for prom so far. That’s not nearly enough to pay for a dress, purse, shoes, hair styling and so on.

And Belle of the Ball addresses those ancillary needs as well. There were purses, shoes and jewelry to choose from, make-up and hairstyling advice, and even dress alterations on the spot. All items and services were donated.

The only hitch for Layman was when a stuck zipper kept her in a dress a lot longer than she would have liked.

Girls trying on dresses also had the services of “personal shoppers,” volunteers such as Mary Alford, who tried to help them find a dress they liked.

“I love picking out the dresses with the girls,” said Alford of Cudahy, a mental health therapist with

Wheaton Franciscan Healthcare-All Saints.

Azalia Watkins, a Horlick High School senior, needed to try on just one dress, a shimmery, silver one, to decide that was the one for her. "I like it, it's very pretty," said Watkins, who also works at All Saints through a Horlick youth apprenticeship.

Her mother, Tracy Watkins, was glad for the quick find. The family was headed for Horlick's boys' basketball tournament game after choosing a prom dress.

Sarrazin said this year's turnout was double the response of the past three years, about 50 girls in each of those. She said the economy may have played a part, but also thought the word is really out now about Belle of the Ball.

"It took three years to get to this point with our reputation," she said

The recession did crimp monetary donations this year, Sarrazin said, although SC Johnson came through with \$500. The event budget is about \$700.

How to donate:

Belle of the Ball is asking people to donate used prom dresses. They will be collected Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Molly Magruder, 330 Main St., Racine. Organizers also need donated space to store wardrobe boxes containing the dresses.

On The Net: <http://racineprom.org>

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