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Organization keeps aiding princesses

By Ryan Clark • Enquirer contributor

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ERLANGER - In 2006, Erin Peterson was shopping in a consignment store when she overheard how a teenage girl couldn't afford the dress she wanted to buy.

"I overheard her ask a clerk if the beautiful, gently used gown on display could be put on hold while she figured out how to pay for it," said Peterson, 36, of Erlanger. "She asked her foster mother for the money, but a prom dress is an extra in life and its price was out of their reach. I saw in her eyes that she was dreaming of that dress and I knew that was a dream I could make come true, so I purchased it for her."

The girl cried, thanked Peterson and said the dress would make her "look just like Cinderella."

"For one day, a little girl was transformed into a princess. I was transformed as well," she said. "In the spring of 2007, Cinderella's Closet became a ministry of Immanuel United Methodist Church in Lakeside Park. Since then we have helped almost 1,800 girls not only find the dress of their dreams, but more importantly renewed confidence in themselves."

Peterson is the founder and director of Cinderella's Closet, a volunteer organization that provides formal wear to girls who could not otherwise afford to attend their proms. Through donations of new and gently used formal dresses and accessories, they fulfill dreams for juniors and seniors referred to them by schools, community organizations or social agencies.

Those girls who qualify can choose from about 3,000 dresses and accessories - all for free. The first Cinderella's Closet event was held in the spring of 2007 at Immanuel United Methodist Church in Lakeside Park. That year, 115 princesses danced through the doors.

The following year the closet served more than 400 girls and gave away free tuxedo rentals to about 50 boys. This year, the goal is serving 800 girls. Last year, two new Cinderella's Closet locations opened, one in Frankfort and another at the Vineyard Church in Cincinnati.

"Next year we will add Cinderella's Closet locations in Texas, Wisconsin and Washington," Peterson said. "It is humbling to me to see how the purchase of one dress has grown."

Peterson says most people just think of getting a prom dress around prom season.

"We not only want to transform girls into princesses for one day or one evening, but we are trying to transform their lives as well - and that takes work year-round," she said.

Summer is when they get the best prices on items like plus-sized dresses, jewelry and formal shoes. In fall and spring, boxed-lunch fundraisers are held to fund those purchases. In January, it's time to contact schools and make appointments for the princesses, and in March they hold the events.

"From the moment our princesses dance through our doors they are greeted with an environment of grace, love and respect," Peterson said. "It is our only mission that they leave knowing they are cherished."

More information about boxed lunch sales and about dress drives can be found at: www.cinderellasclosetusa.org. For more information contact Erin at contactus@cinderellasclosetnky.org.

Know of someone in your community with a good story to tell? Let us know. Submit nominees to Ryan Clark by e-mail: nkyfolktales@gmail.com.

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