

Comments

Keeping prom night safe for teenagers



KIERAN KESNER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The scene of a mock accident simulation put on by Lexington High School to highlight the issues of underage drinking and impaired driving.

By Steven A. Rosenberg | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 30, 2016

The high school prom conjures memories of the nervous invite, a smart tux and luminous dress, and a night of music and magic.

But as prom season begins in Massachusetts, many students are learning to accept another ritual: the growing focus on keeping them safe and secure.

Several districts, including Sharon, Lexington, and Marblehead, require prom-goers to take breathalyzer tests to see if they've been drinking, and many suburban schools have banned limousines and driving, requiring students to take buses.

In some towns, like Marblehead, dates who are 18 and older are screened for criminal records, and students are required to sign an informal "contract" pledging to adhere to school rules.

The restrictions, coupled with the rising cost of tickets gowns and tux rentals, raise the question: Is the prom still worth it?

Some teachers and administrators say the glory days of the prom may be over — much like the ruffled shirt.

"I just feel that the prom, in many ways, is outdated," said Bethan Jones, an English teacher and senior class adviser at Marblehead High School. "I think it's a lot of work, and it's a lot of headaches and it's a lot of stress, and it's a lot of making sure everyone is OK. I don't know if it has the same panache or gravitas that it had."

But students interviewed recently as they prepared for the big night believe the prom is still meaningful. And for a generation that came of age after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, they seem to take the new rules and tighter security in stride.

"I feel like it's a priority, it's a rite of passage," said Cam Doyle, 17, a Malden Catholic senior who plans to attend his prom in May. "I feel the security measures are necessary, otherwise it would be out of control and kids would

be drinking.”

Talia Florino, who stood in Russo’s showroom in Stoneham amid hundreds of gowns hanging on racks, also called the prom relevant and said she appreciated the layers of security.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

At Russo Tux Dresses and Limousine in Stoneham, 17-year-old Michael Schiappa tried on a tux.

“I’ve always been really excited to go. I’m kind of nervous; I’ve seen it in the movies,” said Florino, a Stoneham junior who had just picked out a \$400 tan, mermaid-styled dress that she planned to wear to her prom next month.

A 2015 Visa survey estimated that a family in the Northeast will spend \$1,109 on the prom. Dresses range from \$100 to more than \$1,000; tuxedo rentals average \$200 a night. Throw in tickets, hair stylists, shoes, corsages,

boutonnieres, after-prom parties, and spending money, and some parents are looking at a bill that might rival their mortgage payment.

At The Ultimate in Peabody, where high school girls start browsing for prom dresses after Christmas, Ivy Akotey had settled on a \$600 black one-piece Vienna dress that earned the approval of her mom, Fatou Darboe.

“I expect to spend \$1,500,” said Darboe, who has been working extra hours in recent months at her hair stylist’s job in Lowell to cover the cost.

“What more can we give our kids if they listen to us and go to school?” said Darboe, whose daughter is slated to graduate from Lowell High School in June and attend Salem State University in the fall. “I just want her to be safe.”

While teenagers still remain the stars of the prom, the dance has become a carefully planned event where educators watch nearly every move kids make.

In addition to using a breathalyzer to randomly test students, Newton South High School brings along a police officer to its prom. Donna Gordon, the senior class adviser, believes these tactics discourage students from drinking alcohol.

“The kinds of protocols that we use today are working,” Gordon said. “I’ve seen a difference in students being sober. Maybe 20 years ago we would have somebody who would get sick from drinking or we would find nips of alcohol.”

One of the biggest concerns among educators is what happens after the dance. While students pledge to follow the school rules for several hours, that doesn’t mean they’ll abstain from drinking and drugs afterward.

“I don’t think there’s a high school principal who sleeps that night,” said Everett Superintendent Fred Foresteire.

In 2009, a Saugus senior attended his prom and then consumed about 10 beers at Nahant Beach before getting behind the wheel and killing a 67-year-old woman who was walking her dog. And in 2000, a 17-year-old who had been drinking and driving was killed on a prom night in Natick.

For the last 29 years, Natick parents have been holding an after-prom party for students. Last year, 500 attended.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

At Russo Tux Dresses and Limousine, 17-year-old Talia Florino tried on dresses for her junior prom.

“The party is free to encourage all juniors and seniors to attend, rather than hold their own private after-parties,” said Jill Kovatsis, who is helping to coordinate this year’s event.

This year’s party will be held at the high school from midnight until 5 a.m., and students can spend the night riding bumper cars, playing laser tag and table tennis, singing karaoke, dancing, or munching out.

Jess Roscoe, a spokeswoman for Students Against Destructive Decisions, said about 200 chapters across the state have implemented multiple programs to encourage teenagers to stay safe on prom night. They range from student pledges to abstain from alcohol and drugs, to encouraging drug- and alcohol-free after-prom parties.

SADD also helps coordinate simulations of car accidents, like the one staged recently at Lexington High School, to starkly illustrate the dangers of driving while impaired.

At Russo’s in Stoneham, Alexia Cutler beamed after she tried on a beaded black-and-gold gown. Cutler, 18, of Billerica, is buying two dresses since she’s attending two proms, including her own next month at Shawsheen Valley Technical High School.

Attaining the perfect look is a moment that every high school girl should experience, she said. “It’s the one night you get to dress up and feel beautiful.”

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