

The Capital

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

Published May 18, 2008

Annapolis High Cinderella lives her prom dream

Thanks to several modern-day fairy godmothers

By WENDI WINTERS

Annapolis High senior Renee Cooper had dreamed all her life about going to the prom.

But, like Cinderella, the storybook character who desperately wanted to dress up and go to the dance of her dreams, the idea of attending Friday's prom was beyond Renee's reach without some heavy magical intervention.

It wasn't a Grimm Fairytale but grim reality for the year-old. Renee's family is homeless.

Since the late fall, Renee, her mother and three of her six two family apartments available for the homeless at the L

The only emergency shelter in the city, Light House offers women, and provides daily meals and resources to the area Annapolis Area Ministries, Inc., a group of area churches.

In June, Renee will become one of the first residents of the shelter's Willow House for women on Willow Street. Other family members will transfer to Anchor House, a 2-year transition program, in July.

"We moved a couple years ago from Prince George's County," explained Valerie Thomas, 42, Renee's mother.



While living in Annapolis Gardens, a public housing community, she said, "There was a situation with my oldest son, Ricardo, 18. We had to move. We were staying in a hotel."

When she went to the Light House Shelter one day to pick up a bag of food for her family, Crystal Brownlee, managing director of Light House, offered the family temporary housing in one of the apartments.

Becky Miller, the Light House's Community Outreach manager, recalls Renee, a B+ student, selling candy all fall. It was part of the senior class' fundraising efforts to help underwrite the costs of the prom.

"We talked about the prom and how badly she wanted to go," Ms. Miller recalled. "I'm a sucker for chocolate and I wanted to help her go to the prom."

A few weeks ago, Ms. Miller learned Renee couldn't afford the cost of a single ticket to the prom at the BWI Marriott Hotel, nor could her family pay for a fancy evening dress, shoes and jewelry needed to attend. The ticket alone was \$65. So Ms. Miller and the staff at Light House decided to play fairy godmother.

Donors paid for Renee's prom ticket and gave Ms. Miller money to take the young woman shopping.

The owner of the Varuna Aveda Salon, which regularly provides services gratis to some of the Light House clients, offered to do a prom makeover for Renee.

"I took her to Nordstrom's at Westfield Annapolis Mall to look at the dresses earlier this week," said Ms. Miller. "She picked two out. When Renee came out of the dressing room in the teal chiffon dress, it was so beautiful."

"I like it. It feels comfortable wearing it," Renee said shyly. "I feel like a princess."

Ms. Miller, along with Ms. Brownlee and Ms. Thomas accompanied Renee to Varuna Aveda Friday afternoon. While waiting for her appointment at 4 p.m. with stylist Tracey Blades, they sat in a back room with heated wraps draped around their necks, sipping flutes of spring water.

"It's to relax your muscles," explained Lucia Santoro, director of Varuna Aveda's Sauna and Spa Services.

Renee's hair styling, makeup, and manicure-pedicure would have normally cost \$205.

"Not everyone is able to afford our services, but we are committed to the community and want to help," said Ms. Santoro as she led a tour around the eco-friendly salon, named after a Vedic or Hindu god of water. "Every member of our staff is required to do three hours of community service each month, from management on down."

The salon staff already had given Renee the star treatment the day before, when she received a manicure and pedicure - her first ever.

To match her dress and accent her open-toed, high heeled silver evening sandals, her toenails received a coat of teal paint.

Her fingers were lightly tipped with more teal.

Renee hopes to attend a cosmetology trade school or Anne Arundel Community College in the fall. Light House board member Peter Meredith is working with her on the application process.

Renee went to the prom with 17-year-old friends Shayla Williams and Martina Holland. Martina's cousin shuttled them to the prom and prom breakfast, before driving them home in the wee hours.

"I'm really going to enjoy myself," Renee predicted. "I want to thank Miss Becky and Miss Crystal for everything they did. And, the people who volunteered to help me go to the prom. I thank God for letting me wake up this morning - I've never been to a big dance or prom before."

By 10 p.m., Renee and a table of friends were having a good time in the large BWI Marriott ballroom. As couples bumped and swirled on the dance floor, Renee smiled with exhaustion. She'd been dancing.

"I like the prom, the music and my dress," she said. "I've been dancing to R&B music with my friends."

"We ought to be like this more often," Shayla said of the ethnically and economically diverse crowd of 382 youth. "All dressed up, behaving nicely and not fighting over anything."

At the stroke of midnight, Kohl the Magician amazed the audience by turning a simple scarf into a fluttering white dove. Unlike Cinderella, midnight didn't signal the end of the magic for Renee.

She got to enjoy the evening with her friends until 1:30 a.m., when their chariot arrived.

Wendi Winters is a freelance writer living on the Broadneck Peninsula and was one of the Annapolis High parents volunteering at the prom breakfast.