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WHO'S HOT+WHAT'S *Now* 03.07

INSIDE: Designing for homebodies. A weekend of fashion bliss in L.A. Competitive shopping on the streets of SF. EDITED BY ROBIN RINALDI



Cinderella Story

THE FOUNDERS OF THE PRINCESS PROJECT WANT EVERY GIRL TO FEEL BEAUTIFUL, IF ONLY FOR ONE NIGHT.

On March 17, nearly 3,000 Bay Area high-school girls will enter the old *SF Examiner* building on Market Street, skeptical, no doubt, that its worse-for-wear exterior could possibly reveal, of all things, prom dresses free for the taking. But if past Princess Project giveaways are any indication, the place will be filled with tulle in more colors than a Pantone swatch book, and enough tulle for it to be mistaken for the costume closet at the San Francisco Ballet. This year, there'll even be a DJ.

It's a trunk show of cinematic proportions, complete with a red carpet and a feel-good mission: providing low-income girls with prom dresses, gratis. The nonprofit Princess Project's cofounders, SF residents Kristen Smith Knutson and Laney Whitcanack, recognize that while their own experiences weren't ideal—think bloody nose and flat tire!—one's prom is, nevertheless, a formative experience. To add a Dickensian touch, a reclusive benefactor—none other than romance novelist Danielle Steel—has been known to contribute a rack of impeccable designer gowns and a hefty cash donation. "I think all teenage girls are starry-eyed when it comes to the idea of prom," says Whitcanack, who's also the cofounder of Big Tent Design, an SF company that provides free Web-based software to the volunteer community.

WELL-OILED MACHINE: "WE'RE RUNNING ON THE GOODWILL AND GENEROSITY OF HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE," SAYS KNUTSON (RIGHT) SHOWN HERE WITH WHITCANACK.

Confidence starts on the inside, but how you present yourself can make a big difference in how you feel.

Since its inception in 2002, the Princess Project has employed more than 600 volunteers to support the girls and to organize fundraisers and dress drives. More than 5,000 local girls—from teen mothers to those living in homeless shelters—have received free frocks and baubles from the project, which requires only a valid high-school ID as proof of age and need. "Just

because these girls look a certain way or go to a certain school, we can't presume to know what their financial situation is," says Knutson, a full-time mom who's the former director of external affairs for SF's City Center for Civic Leadership.

This year, the project has amassed \$50,000 in contributions, makeup donated by Maybelline and a stock of 5,000 dresses with labels ranging from Forever 21 to Dolce & Gabbana in sizes zero to 30. "We want every girl to feel good about herself," says Whitcanack, who fondly remembers a young woman who pulled off the rack a size-24 lime-green Jessica McClintock dress. She emerged from the dressing room just beaming. Her cheeks were going to melt off her face. That's the reaction we're going for. I always carry that experience with me." —*Leilani Labong*

JEFF SINGER