

■ **CHARITY:** Students in need choose donated dresses, suits

Prom Project helps teens look good for graduation

RAHUL GUPTA

Special to the Standard

Preparing for the prom is a costly experience for teenagers and parents alike.

There are dresses to choose, hair appointments to make and limos to rent — all of which involve the spending of significant amounts of money for a single day of celebration. For families barely able to make day-to-day expenses, a pricey graduation night outfit is just not part of the budget.

But, now it's possible for disadvantaged teens to attend their proms without their parents worrying how they'll pay for it all thanks to a donation program from the Education Foundation of Niagara.

The Niagara Prom Project, now in its second year, outfits students with formal wear and accessories so they can look great on prom night. During

the single-day event, teens can browse racks of gowns and suits in various sizes and styles — all donated by businesses and individuals. Alterations are done on-site and organizers are hoping to enlist volunteer makeup artists and florists, as well as provide gift certificates from local salons and accessory shops for this year's event, which takes place May 1 at the District School Board of Niagara's Education Centre.

"It's difficult to organize a cash fundraiser in Niagara," said Julie Densham, EFN executive director. "It's a lot easier with product donations."

Densham said the donation program was inspired by a friend of her daughter's whose family couldn't afford to pay for her Grade 8 graduation.

"I thought, how many students choose not to attend because they can't afford it?" Densham recalled.

After learning that similar



JULIE JOCSAK Standard Staff
Dara Goulet, left, and Julie Densham hold some of the prom dresses for Prom Project 2010.

donation programs existed in 80 North American municipalities, but not Niagara, Densham and EFN events co-ordinator Dara Goulet started the donation drive last year, successfully

outfitting 40 students. This year, they're aiming for 100.

Queen Fashion Must Haves, a local clothier, donated 15 dresses last year and is planning to donate the same number this year.

"I think it's a wonderful cause to help girls who can't afford to look beautiful on such an important night in their lives," owner Dorothy Osthorn said from the St. Catharines shop.

Goulet said it is important to allow teens to have a chance to take part in the excitement of a prom without shame or guilt.

"Prom is a rite of passage," she said. "It's about saying goodbye to a part of your life. There shouldn't be any stigma."

New or gently used dresses, suits, shirts, pants, shoes and accessories can be donated at several locations across Niagara. For a list, visit www.efnonline.org or call at 905-641-2929 ext. 54103.

rgupta@stcatharinesstandard.ca