

Gowns fit for a prom queen

Cleaners collects 1,800 gowns for Glass Slipper

By **Georgia Evdoxiadis**

Daily Herald Staff Writer

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Jim Nutini would like to show you the Dolly Parton dress.

It hangs near the back, in a row of freshly cleaned prom gowns clad in sheaths of plastic.

The scarlet dress shimmers brightly, with enough rows of sequins to make a country singer proud.

But if cherry-red sequins aren't your thing, the assistant manager also offers a "safari dress," a long stretch of cheetah-print fabric, tied at the waist with a gold sash.

Don't like that one either? Not to worry: At Zengeler Cleaners, almost every shade and style of prom dress is available for a young girl to wear out to the big dance. There's even a slinky Vera Wang number. And it's all free.

Zengeler collected more than 1,800 of the gowns — not to mention shoes, purses, jewelry and makeup — and will give all the items donated by customers to the Glass Slipper Project.

The Chicago-based charity outfits hundreds of underprivileged teens who couldn't afford to buy expensive prom ensembles on their own.

At the yearly "boutique," girls are assigned a personal shopper, who will help them pick out just the right drop earrings, pink lipstick and spiky black heels to go with their gown. For some, it's the experience of a lifetime.

"The enthusiasm on the girls' faces, it's pretty overwhelming," said Marie Marasovich, who is on the board of directors for the Glass Slipper Project. "We get tons of thank-you letters."

And Zengeler Cleaners aims to be a part of it all. With seven stores in the area, including two in Libertyville, Zengeler's made the charity a company priority.

"It seemed like a great cause. It was a great fit for our company," said Tom Zengeler, the company's president.

This year, they've collected 1,842 gowns and 300 shoes — double last year's haul. They also cleaned, repaired and sorted the dresses. High schools around the area also brought in hundreds of dresses, Zengeler said.

Store manager Marie Clay said one donor dropped off 150 gowns — along with shoes and makeup — one night without leaving a name. The employees didn't even know what was in the bags until the next day.

For the employees, just knowing they've helped out is rewarding.

"It's a good cause," said Nutini, who has been working at Zengeler's for 10 years. "That's what counts."