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For Some, Prom Is a Platform for Good Deeds, Social Change

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By BETH J. HARPAZ Associated Press

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Proms have traditionally been a night of glamour and romance, complete with backstage drama over dates and dresses. But prom culture is changing. Some teens now see prom as an opportunity to be inclusive rather than exclusive. They're using proms as vehicles for good deeds and to take a stand on issues that matter to them.

Teens are inviting classmates with autism to be their dates. One student group organized a prom for senior citizens. In Louisiana, a gay female student fought for the right to wear a tux. And a museum now displays a prom dress worn by a student who spearheaded a racially integrated prom.

"Change can look like a prom dress," said Matthew McRae, spokesman for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. "We thought it was a great example of someone making a change at the community level."

Prom can be "a platform for social change," said April Masini, who writes the AskApril.com advice column. While some teens see prom as a night of playing grown-up by dressing in fancy clothes, for others, "their idea of being an adult is standing up for what they believe in."

Here are some stories about teenagers who, instead of worrying about how to fit in, used their proms to reach out to others or express their right to be different.

INVITING A CLASSMATE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Kaitlin McCarthy, 17, is a high school junior in Canton, **Massachusetts**. Her schoolmate, Matty Marcone, has special needs and a range of medical issues. "He's the sweetest kid," Kaitlin said. "I see Matty for who he is. I say, 'Oh, that's my buddy Matty,' not 'Poor Matty, he's dealing with this or that right now!'"

Matty told Kaitlin he wanted to buy Disney World for her. "I said, if he's going to buy Disney World for me, I should bring him to the prom," said Kaitlin.

The whole school — including Kaitlin's boyfriend — joined the effort. Matty learned to dance. Special ed teachers and the school nurse chaperoned to help manage Matty's diabetes. The hockey team, which had previously chosen Matty as team CEO, made sure he had friends to hang out with in addition to Kaitlin.

Matty and Kaitlin ended up being crowned prom king and queen.

"A lot of the kids know his situation, that he's very sick. But they also respect him as a peer. This wasn't done out of pity," said Matty's mom Susan Marcone. "There was magic in the room that night."

Another kind of magic took place at Division Avenue High School in Levittown, New York, when senior Sarah Kardonsky invited a friend with autism, Michael Pagano, to the prom.

Michael had asked several girls to the prom but all said no. "I was going to go by myself if I didn't

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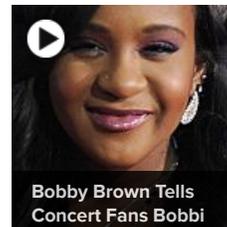
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get a date," he said. "But it turned out Sarah had a plan."

And what a plan. Michael is a **New York Jets** fan, so Sarah messaged Jets players via Instagram and asked for help making a video prom invitation. To her surprise, Antonio Cromartie and eight other Jets sent videos of themselves saying, "Mike, will you go to the prom with Sarah?" She stitched the videos together and it was shown one morning in school with the day's announcements.

"He's such a great kid, I didn't want him to go alone," said Sarah. "He had already been turned down so many times, I wanted to make it special for him."

The publicity led to a free limo, free tux and an appearance on "The **Ellen DeGeneres** Show." But here's what matters to Sarah: "People who worry so much about what dress to wear or who to go with, that's not what prom is about. Prom is about having a good time. You should just be surrounded by people who make you happy."

BEING YOURSELF AT PROM

Claudetteia Love, 17, was barred from wearing a tux to the April 24 Carroll High School prom in Monroe, Louisiana. After word of her quest got out, the dress code was changed with the support of the school board president.

"I am thankful that my school is allowing me to be who I am," she said.

"Proms are a very traditional part of the high school experience," said Asaf Orr, staff attorney at the National Center for Lesbian Rights, which supported her case. "Participating in those events as your whole self, that's really what it's about. These kids are saying, 'I want to go to this event, I'm not going to hide part of who I am.'"

PROM DRESS IN A MUSEUM

Last fall, Mareshia Rucker's red sparkly prom dress went on display at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. She wore the dress in 2013 to a racially integrated prom that she and other teenagers from Wilcox County High School in Rochelle, Georgia, organized. Until then, segregated proms had been arranged by families in the community.

"Human rights isn't just something addressed by world leaders or famous people," said McRae, who helped curate the exhibit. "It's something we can all make a difference in."

A PROM FOR YOUNG AND OLD

When Rahul Peravali was a student at Houston High School in Germantown, Tennessee, he participated in a prom that brought students and senior citizens together. When he got to Rhodes College in Memphis, he proposed it as a project for the college class council. On April 7, dozens of kids showed up to dance with folks their grandparents' age.

For the seniors, it was special because "so many of them did not get to go to their own proms," said Kay Lightfoot, director of the Lewis Center for Seniors. But the "students had a great time too," said Peravali.

The seniors taught the youngsters some steps for big-band numbers, and students led the line dance for the 2007 R&B hit "Cupid Shuffle."

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