

Articles

Lights, Camera...Prom!

Celebrity-obsessed kids (and it's not just the girls) are taking prom mania to new heights with red carpet arrivals, \$2,000 getups, and Diddy-style after-parties. And their guilt-ridden parents are going along with it.

By Marisa Meltzer



Illustration by Juliette Borda.

changed in the way teens socialize, with a Friday night these days more likely to include pulling out the fake ID to go clubbing in town than making out to Peter Gabriel's *So* in the high school parking lot. Yet ironically, celebrity, and our constantly growing obsession with it, has rendered prom as relevant as ever.

"This culture of rich young adults has been developed via every available media outlet," says Tina Burgos, co-owner of high-end men's and women's Newbury Street boutique Stel's, which this season sold an \$800 gray Acne suit to a prom-going lad. "Many of these young celebrities"—here she cites Nicole Richie, Paris Hilton, Kimberly Stewart—"are offspring of wealthy parents, and their lives are fascinating to an audience that aspires to that lifestyle."

Jillian Greenstein and her friends gathered after last year's Sharon High School junior prom to "discuss." Compared with theirs, the Laguna Beach dance, it was decided, had turned out so much better. Cooler DJ. Nicer dresses. Cuter guys! Overall, says Greenstein, "our prom didn't rate very well at all. Theirs looked like so much more fun." Of course, the privileged teens in Laguna Beach—or rather, on *Laguna Beach*, the (scripted) MTV reality show—are blessed with spending money as seemingly endless as California sunshine; Greenstein and her pals go to... Sharon High. But whatever. This year, she and her friends are considering breaking their school's floor-length-gown tradition, the ladies of *LB* their inspiration. "A lot of *LB* girls wore short dresses to their prom," explains Greenstein. "They looked so cute and comfortable."

And famous. By all accounts, the prom—around since the late 19th century—should have by now gone the way of the bootleg jean. So much has

Everyone who's not famous wants to be, and teens most of all. Ultrarevealing online profiles on MySpace and Facebook, as well as unabashed exhibitionism as chronicled on YouTube and reality shows like *LB* and like-minded spinoff *The Hills*, point to a generation fueled by gratuitous self-promotion, a need to be noticed. Prom is just another vehicle, and a pretty effective one at that.

"Prom is a rite of passage—that's not a new phenomenon," says Dr. Nancy Rappaport, assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of school programs at Cambridge Health Alliance. "But there has been an enhancement in being over-the-top. The costs have increased exponentially," taken to an extreme by kids who view prom as a chance to create their own little Hollywood moments, disregarding expense to plan bigger, badder, and more-exclusive affairs. Preparation is intense: cut and color, lash extensions, bikini waxing, teeth whitening, hair straightening, Mystic tans, and lots and lots of shopping.

It all adds up to one perfect night, or so they hope. "You really feel like a celebrity with all the cameras going off and being all dressed up," says Aya Muramatsu, a 15-year-old sophomore at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School who got asked to the prom as a freshman, and wore Marc Jacobs heels for the occasion. This morning Muramatsu had been watching *Never Been Kissed*—the 1999 romantic comedy starring Drew Barrymore as a reporter who goes undercover as a high school student. "The girls just got picked up at their door and *driven* to prom," she relays now with real horror. "They didn't get their hair done, either!"

For parents, meanwhile, providing for a lavish prom can be a way to reward their kids for enduring four years of high-stress high school, especially at a time when colleges are more selective—and more applicants are being left disappointed—than ever. In some wealthier towns like Needham, Wellesley, Lexington, and Lincoln, prom spending also provides an outlet for neighborhood competition, a status symbol not just for kids, but for parents, too. "There's a kind of peer pressure parents feel in the elite suburbs," says Dava Muramatsu, mom of Aya and owner of Newbury boutique Matsu, where this year prom-goers are spending up to \$600 on dresses—up from \$200 just two years ago. Marla Bergman, mother of Alana, a junior at Needham High School who wore Stella McCartney and Jimmy Choos to a semiformal last year, asks: "Do I approve? What choice does a mother of a teenage girl have? Should your child be the only one with inferior anything? Not in my house."

In her Cambridge practice, dermatologist Ranella Hirsch sees a slate of teen patients desperate to achieve flawless skin by the big night. Going way beyond the normal pre-prom acne treatment, some come in hoping to talk her into injecting Botox under their arms so they won't sweat on their dresses (she says no). Hirsch points to the whole "culture of makeovers," which promises that anyone, with enough cosmetic treatments, makeup, and designer clothes, can mimic a celebrity. This year, skin-baring strapless dresses are calling for extensive skin-clearing regimens—chemical peels, microdermabrasion, and laser treatments to smooth exposed chest, shoulder, and back areas—all of which takes dedication, a lot of scheduling, and up to \$10,000. "It used to be that they'd come in two weeks ahead of time," Hirsch says. "Now people are planning for prom the way they do a wedding." The analogy's not far off: With the average age at first marriage in Massachusetts one of the highest in the country for men and women, prom has become a kind of substitute nuptials for a generation delaying their wedding day almost into their thirties.

Andover High School junior Amanda Fantini estimates her classmates spend "a minimum of \$800" getting prepped for the prom. "When browsing for a prom dress, money is not seriously considered," explains Grace Herman, a sophomore at Newton South High School who totes a Marc Jacobs bag and calls her town "the Laguna Beach of the East" ("there's a lot of money and a lot of places to spend it"). Stores like Neiman Marcus and Gretta Luxe do a brisk business in dresses in the \$700-to-\$800 range. Anthony Conti, a sales consultant at Louis Boston, has high school customers buying Proenza Schouler and Zac Posen frocks—at the cost of \$1,800 and up.

For girls, having the best dress is far more important than having the cutest date. "Prom is just as much a fashion show as it is a good time with your friends," says Herman. Showing up in the same outfit as someone else, in fact, would be

a “nightmare,” she says, and many teens are traveling considerable distances to do their shopping to ensure they won’t unwittingly inspire an *Us Weekly*-style “Who Wore It Best?” debate at school on Monday morning. Alana Bergman got her mom, Marla, to promise a shopping excursion in New York if she fails to find a dress in Boston. Fantini is buying hers in Miami this year.

Boys, too, are getting swept up in prom mania like never before. For them, a superhot girl still scores higher than a superfly tux—as Lexington High School senior Meikle Paschal says, “People are definitely judged on their date. The hotter your date, the better you look.” But if it was once desirable for a high school guy to play it cool during prom season, that notion has been replaced by the far greater desire to stand out. “There’s a lot of competition in what guys wear,” says Matt Boyes-Watson, a 17-year-old junior at Cambridge Rindge and Latin. “Everyone wants to wear the light blue *Dumb and Dumber*-style suits, or an orange bow tie, or a ’70s-style hat.” Some are even forsaking the traditionally effortless rented penguin suit; this year, Boyes-Watson will be wearing a tuxedo his parents bought for him. Nick Szathmary, an 18-year-old senior at Lincoln-Sudbury—who counts Gucci, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Nike among his preferred brands—might use the Neiman Marcus personal shopper he shares with his dad to help find the winning tux.

Guys are also going to great, often elaborate, lengths to secure prom dates well ahead of time, in February or March. “One boy this year lined the school walkway with signs asking a girl to prom,” says Muramatsu. “And one of my friends said he was renting a sign in a sports arena in Worcester.” Adds Greenstein, “I’ve seen guys bring a cake to school and use it to ask a girl to prom. One kid got flowers and a balloon that read, ‘Will you go to prom with me?’” Szathmary, who says one of his friends proposed by writing it on the girl’s car windshield, thinks the showy prom proposals have caught on because “it’s a big deal for girls. They want to know ‘Why are you choosing me? Why don’t you ask me like you mean it?’ Making it a big deal is showing that you care, you mean what you say, and you really want her to come.” (It’s also probably no small coincidence that such grand gestures are a big part of the prom ritual on *LB*, where last season Derek asked Lexie to the prom via a theater marquee.)

The girls, meanwhile, are taking on a more active role in the choosing, rather than waiting to be chosen. “A lot of the asking is done by, or somehow dictated by, girls,” says Annie Clause Zverina, a 16-year-old junior at Brookline High School. At Andover High, says Fantini, “the guys don’t ask the girls to prom. The girls take their pick and, once they’ve chosen, he’s off-limits.” One group of girls at her school decided three months before prom who they wanted to go with. (They referred to this as “the Plan.”)

Once the date is secured, focus turns toward what happens *after* the dance. “My main influence is P. Diddy because he is known for having the most craziest after-parties known to man!” says Fantini, who describes the post-prom festivities in Andover as “sick.” “I’ve learned from him that the only way to do it is to do it *big!*” This year she plans to party-hop—hitting one in Andover and another at someone’s “huge” beach house. The Lincoln-Sudbury jocks who play sports and don’t go tanning, as Szathmary describes his preppy cohorts, will take one or two limos to someone’s home for a small but nonetheless debauched after-party, the kind where girls might tote water bottles filled with vodka, Lohan-style. (Newton South’s Herman, for her part, says, “The kind of parties Lindsay goes to can’t even measure up to the parties that happen here. Kids from Newton know how to have a good time just as well as any celebrity.”)

Right now, though, Szathmary has a more pressing issue to think about: securing the limo. “Everyone uses a Hummer limo now,” he says. “I’m the type of person who wants what’s most unique and different. Girls want that.” He adds that his “main goal” *had* been to book a Range Rover limo, but unfortunately the only one in Boston had been totaled. So instead, he says, “I’ve been eyeing the Porsche Cayenne.” Lincoln-Sudbury offers a chartered shuttle for \$5 to take kids to the dance, but Szathmary scoffs at the thought. School-subsidized transportation isn’t proving much more popular over in Lexington, where this year administrators implemented prom buses to help keep kids safe. Paschal, who will be coordinating his tuxedo with his date’s dress—and their limo—accuses the town of ruining the glamour of the big night. “How am I supposed to look hot getting out of a mandatory prom bus? I would rather take the T.”

Prom comes at a vulnerable time for parents: just as kids are poised to leave the nest. So, the logic goes, what’s wrong

with one last hurrah? “Perhaps we all want some things to stay the same, especially when a lot is about to change,” says Edie Ravenelle, whose daughter Andrea is a junior at Lincoln-Sudbury. Adds Barbara Staszak, whose daughter Maddie attends Grafton High School in Grafton: “We have more income collectively as a society and we like to spend it on our kids.” She won’t say how much she spent on Maddie’s dress this year. “I remember my grandmother making my prom dress,” she says. “We purchased my daughter’s...and I’ll leave it at that!”

Says Harvard’s Nancy Rappaport, “There is a false sense that parents can alleviate the stress both they, and their kids, are feeling by providing for a mega prom.”

Of course, not all parents—or kids—are buying into the extravagance. “I’m lucky to have a grounded girl who loves nothing better than getting a pair of designer jeans for \$14.99,” says Ravenelle. Andrea, for her part, says, “I would rather get five new outfits than one dress that I will probably only wear once.” Even Angela O’Dowd, a senior at Newton North who has been trying on dresses every weekend on Newbury Street and purchased an unlimited tanning package in preparation, ultimately decided to wear a leopard-print MarkWongNark dress she has—gasp—worn before.

In the end, all the effort that goes into prom preparation is a way for a kid to market his- or herself, which is really what’s keeping the tradition alive and well. “Kids have to sell themselves to colleges, they have to show what they’re able to achieve earlier,” says Rappaport. Prom now is another area “where you have to demonstrate a proficiency, except it’s not AP coursework or fluency in different languages; it’s who can have the most lavish night and who can be the social ringleader.” Here the whole paradox of adolescence is distilled: More than any other event, prom is the one through which a teenager can prove his or her individuality, without, it seems, many boundaries. Their methods, though, draw them closer to conformity: renting the same stretch limos, shopping at the same exclusive boutiques, imitating the same celebrities.

But sometimes they buck the trend and let their own personality shine through. As adorable as the short dresses she saw on *Laguna Beach* were, Jillian Greenstein ended up buying a dress she thought was less Orange County, more her: It’s magenta, it’s beaded, it has straps that cross in the back. And it’s long.

Originally published in Boston Magazine, May 2007.

- < [Return to Archives](#)
-