

Dancing to Dreams At the Cinderella Ball
Students With Disabilities Savor Their Night in the Limelight

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Stella Jackson had imagined this moment for weeks. Her everyday ponytail had been transformed into a cascade of curls in a two-hour salon visit that morning. Now, she glided across the ballroom, teal gown shimmering.

With a big smile she'd wear all night, the 20-year-old senior at Prince William County's Freedom High School leaned into the touch-screen computer attached to her wheelchair.

"I'm happy," she typed. "Sexy."

Then she gave a mischievous nod toward the 17-year-old standing nearby, the young man she would dance with for hours. "Aaron said wow."

Stella, who has cerebral palsy, soon was shimmying and swaying to the booming music of Hillary Duff and Mary J. Blige at the Cinderella Ball, an annual prom for students with disabilities held Saturday night in downtown Washington. Under a swirl of colored lights, girls in sparkly dresses tossed aside high-heeled shoes. Boys in tuxedos pulled off ties. But at a prom like no other, the labels, insecurities and inhibitions that are part of high school life for all students also were shed on that dance floor.

Helen McCormick, a former Arkansas schoolteacher, held the first Cinderella Ball three years ago at the House, a youth center she runs with her son Todd in a Woodbridge warehouse. They wanted it to be special, glamorous. About 78 students attended.

Last year, the dance outgrew the building, spreading into a tent in the parking lot. This year, during a months-long push for donations, McCormick marched into the Willard InterContinental asking for whatever decorations could be spared, perhaps "almost-dead flowers." She walked out with a free ballroom.

McCormick and the students who come to the House after school to do homework and shoot baskets raised about \$100,000 for the ball. They went door-to-door and stood outside convenience stores collecting change. Invitations went out through Prince William and Fairfax county schools, and word spread to students elsewhere in the region.

In the weekends leading up to the dance, girls came to the House to pick donated dresses from racks. Volunteer seamstresses made sure they fit just right, and there were tables of jewelry, shoes and evening bags. For the boys, there were ties and crisp handkerchiefs.

Just before 6 p.m., U.S. Marines in dress uniform flanked two paths to the Willard doors, holding gleaming swords in an arch as each guest arrived. After a dinner of chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans, followed by ice cream and mini cookies, came a motivational speech from Kyle Maynard, who was born without arms below the elbows or legs below the knees. "American Idol" winner Ruben Studdard sang.

As Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" started, Randy Hildebrandt, an Air Force officer in dress uniform, whisked his daughter, Caleigh, onto the floor. Holding hands, they danced, her deep purple dress glittering as her wheelchair spun.

"We're going to close the house down," said Caleigh, 14, of Benton Middle School in Manassas.

"That's right," her father said. "We are shutting it down."

Sure enough, they were still going strong just after 10 p.m., when the D.J. announced the night would wrap up with a slow song. Hildebrandt lifted Caleigh, who has spina bifida, from her chair, holding her close for one last father-daughter spin. Across the room, Aaron bent his knees, hunching low. He and Stella danced cheek-to-cheek.