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Belle of the Ball Comes of Age

While most of the young ladies in Lizet Ceja’s high school graduating class of 2008 were dreaming of their high school prom, Lizet and her family were trying to make ends meet. Her father had been laid-off after 15 years with the same company and unemployment was not enough to pay the bills. Lizet and her mother, determined that her daughter would go to college, had been saving money and agreed that they would not touch the money even if it meant Lizet would miss her first and only high school dance. Education was more important.

A close friend of Lizet’s mentioned to her that she was attending an event through Girls Incorporated of Orange County that would provide a free prom dress. Hopes of attending her senior prom began to dance in her head and what she found at the very first Belle of the Ball in 2008 turned out to be more than just a pretty dress. “I was surprised to find out that the event was offering more than just a free prom dress. As a matter of fact the event was empowering and motivating! It allowed me to see myself in a different light, a prettier light!” Lizet said.



Lizet Ceja (4th from the left) with 2008 Belles



Lizet Ceja (2nd from the left) in her perfect Prom Dress in 2008

Belle of the Ball provides under-privileged teenage girls with the opportunity to shop for a prom dress, shoes and accessories while being exposed to the possibilities of what their future may hold on a college campus. Now in its 7th year, this unique collaboration between WHW, Orange Coast College, Orangewood Children’s Foundation and Girls Incorporated is aimed to empower these impressionable young ladies to improve their self-esteem, broaden their scope of possibilities and to provide them with a prom dress and accessories that their families may not otherwise be able to afford due to limited financial resources.

“One of the workshops that stood out to me,” recalled Lizet, “and to this day I still remember was the Self-Esteem Workshop. During most of my teenage years I battled with self-esteem issues, never really understanding where they came from or how to deal with them. I remember learning about the effects the media has on the way we perceive ourselves and how women are constantly comparing themselves to the image of perfection that is often depicted on television. This enlightening information allowed me to begin my journey to self-acceptance of my own body image.”

Lizet continued, “And shopping for a dress was a blast! The personal shoppers helped me select three dresses to try on. I remember being fearful that I wouldn’t find a dress or that the dresses would all look horrible on me. But surprisingly, the first dress I tried on fit like a glove! I came out of the dressing room to a crowd of cheering personal shoppers; they made me feel like a princess! I will never forget that moment; I felt like the prettiest girl in the room, which was a feeling I had never felt before. I was then allowed to select shoes, jewelry and a purse and before I knew it, I was ready to attend my first high school dance! Although this was a one day event, it had a lasting effect on me. And On May 5, 2008, I attended my senior prom in my perfect dress with a new found self-confidence.”

Lizet went on to attend college and graduated Magna Cum Laude from California State University at Fullerton in the fall of 2012. With a desire to learn more about the non-profit world, Lizet applied for an internship at WHW and two months before her internship ended was offered the position of Volunteer Coordinator. “Oddly enough,” Lizet says, “one of the first volunteer recruiting and managing projects I worked on was Belle of the Ball 2013. That’s when I realized I had come full circle. Today I help make prom dreams and more come true for other teen girls and it’s an amazing feeling!

As Volunteer Coordinator for WHW, Lizet recruits, trains and coordinates the over 1,000 volunteers that support all aspects of WHW program and administrative needs. Lizet also invests valuable time and focus to ensure the engagement of countless college and university interns throughout Orange County ensuring WHW can help build leaders of tomorrow through multidisciplinary service learning opportunities.

Since the first Belle of the Ball in 2008, the collaborative event has served over 1,300 at-risk teens throughout all of Orange County, providing deserving young women with a day of pampering and empowerment. “This is one of the most rewarding programs we put together all year and we are proud to have a former Belle play a significant role in recruiting and managing the volunteers for this special day” said Robyn Williams, WHW’s Director of Programs.



Today, Lizet Ceja representing WHW at a recent Volunteer Recruitment Fair

WHW is asking the Orange County community to donate new or gently used formal dresses, dress shoes, evening purses and jewelry to support this year’s 7th Annual Belle of the Ball event, which will be held on Saturday, March 22. Items that are in high demand include: plus-size dresses, evening purses and jewelry. Donations may be dropped off at any WHW donation location through Monday, March 10th. For more information, go to <http://www.whw.org/belle-of-the-ball>.

About WHW. WHW is a 501(c)(3) whose mission is to provide comprehensive employment support services to empower disadvantaged men, women and teens to achieve economic self-sufficiency through employment success and who has served over 40,000 clients since 1993. WHW’s Employment Success Program includes resume and interviewing skills, workshops, computer classes, image consulting, professional clothing appropriate for interviews and transportation services. Supported by United Way, WHW’s services are always at no charge or obligation to clients and 260 referring non-profit partners. For more information on WHW and its Employment Success Program, go to www.whw.org.