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FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE: DAYTON

The youngest prom ever. Rosa Parks preschool hosts dance.



Preschoolers Joshua Summerlin, Scott Collins and Hanslo St. Louis enjoy themselves at the prom. CONTRIBUTED

It's prom season, when high school students look forward to dressing to the hilt and dancing the night away. Dayton's Rosa Parks Early Learning Center, on Lori Sue Avenue, put a new spin on the popular gala by having a preschool prom.

Unlike the high school event, parents and siblings, as well as staff, were welcomed and came out in their finest attire.

"About 400 people were there, and just about everyone dressed up," said Principal Michelle (Shelley) Fulcher, who wore a bridesmaid's dress. "The kids loved it and said my dress was so pretty. Some of the little girls were wearing pageant gowns, a father and son dressed in the same outfits, and one family with three children dressed all in green."



Rosa Parks teacher Soammy Feliciano-Hurst (right) is surrounded by students at the preschool prom. Elizabeth Swartz, who came up with the idea, is in the white dress with lace floral headband. CONTRIBUTED



Kevin VanBibber dances with his daughter, Lyrical VanBibber, at the Rosa Parks prom. CONTRIBUTED

The prom was held from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. April 23, and everyone got out on the gymnasium floor and danced. “The teachers were on the floor the whole time, and the kids swarmed around their teachers. Parents danced, little boys were breakdancing. It was so much fun,” Fulcher said.

Rosa Parks, in partnership with the Miami Valley Child Development Centers, opened its doors to 3- to 5-year-olds this year, with 320 preschoolers in 16 classrooms; previously, it had been a PreK-8 elementary school. Next year, the school will add four kindergarten classes.

Para-educator Elizabeth Swartz came up with the prom idea. “I wanted to provide the kids with an opportunity to feel like a prince or princess and have an event that was just about them,” she said. “I especially wanted it for our special-needs kids, who might not be going to a high school prom. I worked at Gorman before it closed, which was dedicated to educating special-needs students, so they are very near and dear to my heart,” she said.

Her idea grew with staff support, and fellow teachers Sara Mendez and Soammy Feliciano-Hurst volunteered to be co-coordinators.

“We went into the community for donations,” said Swartz. “Sam’s Club donated cupcakes, a local pastor brought in his juicer and fresh fruits to make drinks for the kids, Target gave gift cards and staff donated a lot and helped to decorate. Angela Shelton’s daughter is in a Dayton-based dance team, and they performed.

“I wore an off-white, sparkly, lacy dress, danced and had a good time,” said Swartz. “Parents danced with their children, and it was a good community-building event. It was a big undertaking, but well worth it. Everyone had fun.”

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