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Prom dress charity is her legacy

BYLINE: Coralie Carlson

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Family of teen killed in crash builds on her dress collection project

The Associated Press

POMPANO BEACH, Fla. -- Before she died in a car accident last year, 16-year-old Rebecca Kirtman collected about 250 prom dresses and gave them to needy girls across South Florida.

Now her closet of dresses is open to girls around the world.

Inspired by her kindness, Rebecca's parents, friends and family have collected more than 3,000 gowns and opened a boutique in Pompano Beach. More than two dozen chapters of Becca's Closet are opening in nine states, and another is starting in Singapore.

"She would have loved to see this," said Rebecca's 17-year-old friend Alexandra Venezia as she helped girls pick out dresses at the boutique.

Rebecca died Aug. 20, just days before the start of her junior year, while driving home from orientation at Nova High School. Her car collided with a sport-utility vehicle on a rain-slick road and skidded under a tractor-trailer.

"It was just very clear to me that I needed to do something to show how good Becca was," said her father, Jay Kirtman, his eyes welling with tears.

Kirtman, along with grieving family and friends, turned the dress bank that Rebecca ran out of her home into a federally certified charity with a board of directors, a student board, a scholarship fund and a Web site.

The teen magazine YM featured the link in its March issue, and soon readers were starting local chapters from New York to California.

"It just seemed overwhelming," said Phil Goldstein, a board member whose daughter, Jenna, was friends with Rebecca. "I thought someday we would be a big organization, but I didn't realize it would happen so soon."

Donations of dresses -- sizes 0 to 42 -- have come from across the country, including five from the set of the soap opera "The Young and the Restless" and an anonymous shipment of \$10,000 worth of gowns from Mississippi.

On April 10, Rebecca's 17th birthday, the group moved from a donated storage facility into the boutique at Festival Marketplace, a flea market in town.

That is where girls such as Phaedra Fleming come by appointment to look through racks of dresses to find the perfect gown.

Fleming, a senior at Cross Creek School in Pompano Beach, was in foster care until October, when she turned 18, and now lives on a stipend from the state. It is not enough for luxuries such as prom dresses.

"At that point, I was like, I'm not going," Fleming said.

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She contacted Gary Levine, her former caseworker, and he directed her to Becca's Closet. There she found an elegant Donna Gray embroidered silver dress with a matching shawl. "Realistically, without this, there's no prom dress," Levine said.

Later that morning, 18-year-old Dionne Thompson left the boutique with a sparkly, floor-length, midnight blue gown. Thompson lives with her sister and plans to attend the prom at Blanche Ely High in Pompano Beach.

"I never thought I was going to go to my senior prom," Thompson said.

Girls who need a dress contact the organization through the Web site to make an appointment at the boutique. They must show a student ID, but no proof of need.

On the Net:

Becca's Closet: <http://www.beccascloset.org>

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