

TIMES RECORD

Night to Shine event treats people with special needs to full prom experience, more

By Kim Murdock / Special to the Times Record

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“Just giggling” was how Ashley Anderson, 27, emerged from the limousine ride, which was part of the 2017 Night to Shine event hosted by West-Ark Church of Christ and sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation, said her mom, Sandi Anderson. The limousine ride was Ashley’s favorite part of the night, Sandi said.

The Night to Shine events have allowed Ashley to enjoy missed opportunities, Sandi said; her special needs presented too much challenge for her to have attended prom during high school.

People like Ashley with special needs can have “an unforgettable prom night experience,” thanks to the Tim Tebow Foundation, notes the timtebowfoundation.org website. The foundation was established “with a mission to bring faith, hope and love to those needing a brighter day in their darkest hour of need,” the website notes. Night to Shine is one of the foundations’ outreach ministries, and the event is used to let “people know that God loves them and that they are worthy,” according to the website.

The 2018 Night to Shine event will be held from 6-9 p.m. Feb. 9 at West-Ark Church of Christ, 900 N. Waldron Ave. in Fort Smith. The event is open to people with special needs who are 14 years of age and older.

The event is a “huge celebration,” said Chris Benjamin, preaching minister at West-Ark Church of Christ. It is far more than a prom or a dance, he said. There is “so much going on,” and the atmosphere has a lot to do with the event.

More than 540 churches across 50 states and 16 countries will host the event this year, and churches, volunteers, honored guests, and most importantly, God, will shine, the foundation website states.

Guests start with the royal treatment once they arrive, right down to entering on the red carpet, Benjamin said. They can select formal wear, have their hair and makeup done and/or have their shoes shined, he said.

Ashley got dressed and had her hair and makeup done at home last year, Sandi said. Ashley had people she wanted to help with that.

Once she arrived at the event, Ashley got her tiara and corsage and had her picture taken, Sandi said.

Each guest experiences a special crowning ceremony as they receive their tiaras and crowns, Benjamin said. They also receive a corsage or boutonniere, and then their picture is taken.

Ashley had more pictures taken in the photo booth before proceeding to the prom, Sandi said.

Although “kind of bashful” when she got to the dance floor at the 2017 event, Ashley’s buddy, Bob, convinced her to dance, and she did, Sandi said.

Attendees are personally assigned buddies who will stay with them during the night, Benjamin said. There were tables set with food, a deejay and, of course, the dance floor, he said.

The Andersons ate a little bit, danced a couple of dances and rode in the limousine, Sandi said. “It went by really fast.”

The Night to Shine event also features a karaoke room and a sensory room for guests who need to get away from all of the noise and activity, Benjamin said. A respite room is provided as well for caregivers, because West-Ark wants “to honor (caregivers) for their lifetime commitment.”

Shopping for a dress among donated dresses was something Sandi said she and Ashley have enjoyed previously. For the 2018 event, a friend has shared a dress with Ashley.

In preparation for her Night to Shine in the past, Sandi said Ashley got a “cute new haircut.” They did all the things you would do if you were “headed to a dance,” Sandi said. Ashley had her nails painted.

“I still choke up seeing her” get ready for an event like the Night to Shine and seeing a group taking that much extra effort, Sandi said. “It takes so much more planning,” she said.

Last year, the website notes that West-Ark hosted 153 queens and kings and utilized more than 350 volunteers during the event. Whether planning to attend as a special guest or as a volunteer, everyone is encouraged to register at fsnighttoshine.org.

Benjamin would like to encourage people to attend. Whether serving others as staff for the event or being served as kings and queens at the event, everyone was a team, he said.

Everywhere they went, Sandi said, “people were happy to be there, and they were happy to help.”



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