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Photo by Bobby Ross Jr.

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## For kings and queens with special needs, a Night to Shine

Arkansas church rolls out the red carpet at prom-like event.



By [Bobby Ross Jr.](#)

**FORT SMITH, Ark.** — Crowns on their heads, the kings and queens flash huge smiles as they emerge from a sleek black limousine.

They wear fancy suits and formal dresses and seem to glide up the red carpet as the waiting crowd cheers.



A king and his buddy receive cheers as they walk up the red carpet. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) The 150-plus royal guests pass under a lighted archway with the message "Night To Shine" flanked by the words "Hope" and "Dream." Many pump fists in the air. Others simply glow.

The friendly paparazzi hold cameras and smartphones with one hand and wipe tears with the other — unable to contain a flood of emotions.

On this recent Friday night, more than 350 volunteers came together at the [West-Ark Church of Christ](#) to throw a giant party for God's children with autism, Down syndrome and other special needs.

"This is a glimpse of the kingdom, that's what it is," said Chris Benjamin, preaching minister for the 700-member church. "You see the upside-down kingdom in action because those often overlooked are given special honor."



**Tim Tebow Foundation**

@tebowfoundation



375 host churches. 50 states. 11 countries. 6 continents.  
150,000 volunteers. 75,000 honored guests. ONE incredible

[#NightToShine](#)

9:35 PM - Feb 10, 2017

29

911

2,496

Around the world, 375 churches in all 50 states and 11 countries hosted prom-like Night to Shine events [sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation](#) — a faith-based charity started by the Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback and inspirational speaker.

In all, the festivities involved 150,000 volunteers and 75,000 guests, the foundation reported.

“Favorite night of the year!” Tebow [declared on Twitter](#).



Volunteer

Allison Thompson enjoys a laugh with a king during Night to Shine. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.)

### ‘JOY AND LOVE’

In this western Arkansas city of 88,000 — near the Oklahoma state line — a catered meal, karaoke and other entertainment highlighted the special night.

“I’ve cried several times tonight just watching my daughter,” said Billie Jones, mother of Nicole Jones, 28, who is mentally disabled. “She’s wanted a prom dress since she was 6 years old. ... She just cried and cried because she was going to get to come.”

Billie Jones described the West-Ark church volunteers as magnificent, praised Tebow for recognizing children “who are always left out” and said she felt God’s love.



Jordon Brown and his wife, Meredith, encouraged the West-Ark Church of Christ to host Night to Shine. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) "We are supposed to become as little children," the mother said, referring to the Lord's words in [Matthew 18:3](#). "So you watch the world through their eyes, and you'll see Christ."

The West-Ark church became involved with Night to Shine after members Jordon and Meredith Brown heard about it on the radio.

Once the Browns saw videos of last year's revelry, they knew they wanted their own congregation to participate.

"There is so much joy and love, and it just makes you want to be a part of it," Meredith Brown said.

"Jesus hung out with the people most people don't honor," Jordon Brown said. "We want to honor these people."

At first, the elders were a little leery — given that Night to Shine includes dancing, an activity with which some Christians take issue.

But the more the elders learned, the more receptive they became.

"Our church has a real heart for children with special needs," said elder Brent Evans, a junior high band director who infused the karaoke with plenty of Elvis. "So it was just a natural thing for us to do. After it's explained to you, it's like, 'How could we not do it?'"

Benjamin stressed that church leaders saw Night to Shine as more of a celebration than a dance.

"At any point, if we had determined that there was anything ungodly or worldly in this, we weren't going to go forward," the minister said. "We haven't seen that. In fact, it transcends many of the events that we do for ourselves."

'MAKE THEM THE BEST'

Boutonnieres and crowns for the gentlemen.

Corsages and tiaras for the ladies.



All the kings and queens who showed up at the West-Ark church were treated like royalty. They ranged in age from 14 to 70.

"The world says they're second-best, and it's like, 'No, we're going to make them the best tonight,'" said West-Ark member Rachel Snider, whose younger sister, Leah Rice, 23, has Down syndrome.

In one room, professional stylists helped the females with their makeup and hair. In the church foyer, a sign encouraged the males to get their shoes shined and hair combed and "feel like a MILLIONAIRE!"

"It's the modern equivalent of foot washing," Benjamin said of the shoe shining.



Harold Davis, one of more than 350 volunteers, shines the shoes of a king. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.)

Asked what he'd remember most about Night to Shine, elder Dave Cogswell joked, "The smell of shoe polish probably. I've shined a lot of shoes."

On a more serious note, he said, "The thing about this that has been so wonderful is that it's not about us at all. It's all for them. It's just been wonderful to see how people have responded."

A volunteer buddy was assigned to accompany each king and queen.



“King” Shawn Bagley, with his Night to Shine buddy Kenna Tackett. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) West-Ark member Kenna Tackett served as Shawn Bagley’s buddy. The 23-year-old said she soaked in Bagley’s happiness.

Asked what her 31-year-old buddy enjoyed most, she said, “The limo. I asked him what his favorite part was, and he said he loved the limo before he even got on the limo. He’s very positive. It’s very uplifting.”

Organizers let caretakers decide whether their loved one would benefit most from a buddy of the same or opposite sex. One mother explained that if her daughter got a male buddy, she’d assume — wrongly — that he was her boyfriend.

Carla Rye, 62, lives at a facility for adults with developmental disabilities. She held a picture of herself taken at Night to Shine and talked excitedly about the “silver sparkly bling-bling” on her bright red dress.

Rye picked a pink corsage even though her caretaker mused that it clashed with her dress.

“I danced with a nice young man,” she said, recalling her evening. “I liked the food.”





"Queens" Najamah Odoemenam and

Carla Rye wait in line at Night to Shine. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.)  
'JUST CAN'T QUIT EATING'

The kings and queens weren't the only honored guests: During the three-hour party downstairs, guests' caretakers ate, chatted and entertained themselves upstairs.

"We have food and games and massage therapists," said Snider, whose parents, Bill and Mary Rice, members of the [Wilshire Church of Christ](#) in Oklahoma City, made a 200-mile drive to bring her sister to the event.

Snider said she knew her parents — and many other caregivers — wouldn't want to leave their children alone at the church, so the upstairs respite rooms gave them a quiet place to enjoy a break.



Bill and Mary Rice with their daughter Leah. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) "They'll be able to relax and have almost a date night," she said.

A separate sensory room, staffed with physical therapists, was available for any kings and queens who became overstimulated or overwhelmed.

Bill Rice jokingly complained that there was too much food.

"I just can't quit eating," said Bill Rice, who enjoyed Domino's pizza, Chick-fil-A chicken and Olive Garden salad — all donated by some of the dozens of businesses that helped support Night to Shine.

"I had vegetables, and they were good," Mary Rice said with a smile. "We sat and watched the 'Star Wars' movie, and that was fun."

Kent Snider, Leah Rice's brother-in-law, served as her buddy. She wore a midnight blue lace dress with a beige lining.

"It was fun," she said, describing the food as her favorite part.

When her mother said she didn't sign up for a massage, Leah Rice expressed her disappointment.



Allison Tucker, Miss Arkansas Teen USA, poses with one of the kings at West-Ark's Night to Shine. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) "Ahhhhh," she said.

"I'm sorry I didn't," Mary Rice replied.

"Mo-o-o-m-m-a," the daughter said, stretching out the word.

"She knows that Mom likes that kind of stuff," Bill Rice explained.

"It was fun just to sit and watch a movie and know that she's having fun," Mary Rice said.

Stephanie Mealer said she, too, found the downtime refreshing.

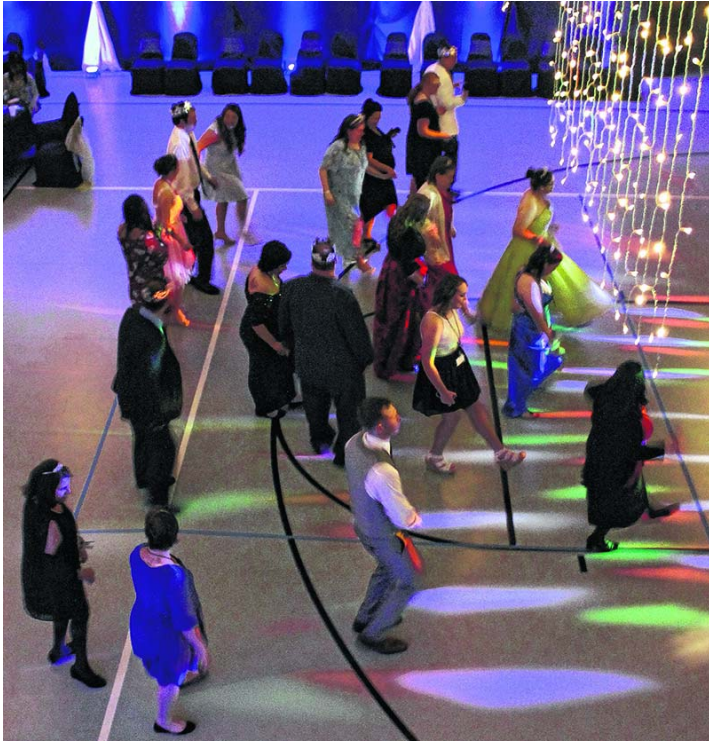
Mealer's 15-year-old daughter, Reagan, has high-functioning autism and attends a regular high school.

"I've never done adult color sheets," Mealer said as she finished her artwork.

"It's pretty amazing, especially being a working mother," she said of the break. "My husband and I both work, so when we get home, we're exhausted."

She thanked the church for reaching out to "a very unministered-to population."





Kings and queens enjoy time on the dance floor during

Night to Shine. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.)

#### 'EAGER TO SERVE'

A banner at the back of the West-Ark auditorium proclaims the church's motto: "Making disciples of Jesus who are eager to serve others."

Serve is exactly what the congregation did on this night.

Vicky Bynum's 15-year-old daughter, Rebecca, won't soon forget Night to Shine.

"I just want to be normal, Mom," Rebecca likes to say.

"You are normal," the autistic teen's mother replies. "God created you this way. You're special."

On this Friday, Rebecca — clad in a purple dress with fingernail polish to match — got to be a little more normal than usual.



Dena Jenkins, mother of an autistic teen, serves on the West-Ark church's staff. (PHOTO BY BOBBY ROSS JR.) "She gets to see other kids and other adults that have some of the same disabilities that she does, and I think that's really neat," Vicky Bynum said. "She feels like a queen."

As Dena Jenkins sees it, God's children with special needs represent "a huge mission field."

Jenkins is a staff member for the West-Ark church's connections ministry. Her 14-year-old son, Adam, has autism. The technologically savvy teen helped his father, Kerry, make prints of the photos taken of the kings and queens.

Many people with a special-needs loved one encounter difficulty finding a church home, Dena Jenkins said.

"Often," she said, "they've been hurt by a church, which just breaks my heart."

In her view, that's part of what makes Night to Shine so important.

"To have the opportunity to reach out to those families and just purely show God's love, that's the ultimate goal," Jenkins said. "We are just humbled and honored to be able to have that opportunity."

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