

TIMES RECORD

Entertainment & Life

'Night to Shine' offers prom for those with special needs

By Marc Hayot / Special to the Times Record

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Jordon Brown was not looking to start a new ministry at West Ark Church of Christ when he was listening to the radio one day. However, that is exactly what happened.

Brown had been listening to a Christian DJ who was discussing Night to Shine.

“He was talking about going to (a Night to Shine event), and I am the least emotional guy you’ve ever met, and I am sitting in the parking lot with tears on my face,” Brown said. “You can’t hear about it and not think, ‘I want to be a part of that,’ so I signed up our church ... didn’t ask for anybody’s permission, (I) just started following Tim Tebow Foundation on Twitter and they said, ‘If you want to host this, sign up’ and so I signed us up, got a confirmation email, sent it to (Pastor Christopher Benjamin) and just said ‘I don’t think we’ll get chosen, but just in case I wanted to let you know about it.”

The church was selected to host the event, so Friday, West Ark Church of Christ, 900 N. Waldron Ave in Fort Smith, will be one of 655 churches around the globe to present Night to Shine. The event will be 6-9 p.m.

Night to Shine offers people with special needs who are 14 or older the chance to experience a prom in a safe and caring environment. The event features limousine rides, dancing, karaoke, a catered meal and a coronation ceremony where each participant is crowned king or queen.

According to Benjamin, when the guests arrive, they will be greeted by cheering paparazzi as they walk down the red carpet to the building where they will get checked in and meet their buddy, a volunteer who will serve as their companion for the night. After that, they enter the auditorium where the participants are

broken up into two lines, one for the men and the other for the women. The gentlemen will be treated to a shoe shine while the ladies will have their hair and makeup done.

Participants then walk to the stage to receive their crowns. Male participants will be crowned by a Marine in dress uniform, while female participants will receive a tiara from a former beauty queen.

“There is some symbolism to that in that these people that are highly honored are honoring these kings and queens,” Benjamin explained. After receiving the royal treatment, the guests are free to enjoy a catered dinner, dance, ride in one of the limousines or visit the karaoke rooms to sing their favorite songs.

While the kings and queens enjoy their magical night, their caregivers are invited to relax in a room upstairs.

“They get to relax, sit back, eat, watch movies (and) we have games for them. It gives them a respite in all of this.” Benjamin said.

Dena Jenkins, one of the event coordinators, further explained the importance of caring for those who care for others.

“Many times, when someone cares for someone with special needs, especially when they’re older ... it is a 24/7 proposition,” she said. “There are no breaks. So, for them to just be able to sit and eat and enjoy someone else’s company without that responsibility, it’s a huge gift, and on top of that to sit with someone with similar experiences and to share with them and even to be prayed over could be a real gift.”

Changes for the 2019 Night to Shine include all volunteers now being required to wear name tags.

“You don’t get in without a name tag. That’s a safety thing,” Brown said. “So, we need everybody to go to the website run their background check. Kings and Queens can come in, but volunteers (have to) have a name tag.”

Benjamin said the dance area will be moved outside this year, and the church has a tent available in case of rain. There will be “double karaoke” this year because it’s been so popular in the past, he said.

This year's meal will be a sit-down dinner instead of buffet style so participants can enjoy a fine-dining experience.

Presently, the church is seeking volunteers to help evening of Night to Shine. Volunteers are needed for all areas, but the primary need is for buddies to accompany the kings and queens.

"We're looking at 300 kings and queens, and we'd like to have 700 volunteers. We'd like to have buddies especially," Brown said. "Buddies just get to come and have fun. Buddies get to do everything that the king and queen does." Buddies must be at least 16 to volunteer for the event.

Night to Shine coordinators say they are looking forward to Friday's event.

"I tell people that if you sign up on the website and join us as a volunteer ... with all the stuff that makes us negative ... you come to this event ... you are going to feel like there is something right with the world," Brown said.

Anyone interested in volunteering for Night to Shine may sign up at www.fsnighttoshine.org.

"You haven't experienced joy until you've seen it on those faces that night," Jenkins said.