



CAMP PENDLETON: Military wives line up for free ball gowns

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Tom Pfingsten For the North County Times | Posted: Saturday, September 17, 2011 7:53 pm | [No Comments](#)
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Armed Forces YMCA volunteer Tassy Hawthorne, center, helps Amanda Vanderlinden, left, and Adrian Davis pick out shoes after the women selected their ball gowns at the giveaway Saturday at Camp Pendleton. TOM PFINGSTEN | For the North County Times

Twenty minutes at a time in the Abby Reinke Community Center on Saturday morning, groups of 50 Marine Corps wives were ushered into a large room filled with racks of ball gowns.

The dresses were clean, organized by size, and ---- best of all ---- free.

"It helps out a lot, because we make enough money just to take care of the household bills, and we have two kids," said 26-year-old Amanda Stovall, who is married to a corporal. "I'd rather spend money on my kids than a ball gown, but if we go to the ball, I want to look beautiful."

Raising the gown on her arm, she added, "I wanted a black-and-white, and I found it."

Coordinated by the Armed Services YMCA of Camp Pendleton ---- with help from the Assistance League

and an Orange County nonprofit called Working Wardrobes ---- the event drew more than 700 women with the promise of a free outfit for the upcoming Marine Corps birthday balls.

"When we came in and brought the gowns in yesterday afternoon at 3 o'clock, there was a line already, and they had their air mattresses," said Suzanne Tabrum, director of community relations for the YMCA. "So the first 50 or so spent the night, and when we got back here at 5:30 this morning, the line was wrapped right around the other side."

Each woman was allowed to try on and choose two gowns, then a pair of shoes or a handbag in the accessory tent just outside the back door.

Several women milling around the tent at 10 a.m. said they had no trouble finding just the sort of gown they were hoping for, even though hundreds of women had already been through the racks.

"We must have about 3,000 in there," Tabrum said, explaining how the event could outfit so many women. "As long as they're gently used, dry-cleaned and on a hanger, we'll take them ---- and we've got some brand-new ones in there this year, as well."

The Marine Corps was founded November 10, 1775, and formal birthday balls began in the 1920s, according to various histories of the tradition.

Today, the annual events are known for crowds of sharply dressed Marines in their "dress blues," accompanied by significant others in similarly spiffy attire.

"I mean, every spouse wants to go to a ball," Tabrum said ---- but many lower-paid enlistees are unable to foot the bill for new clothes.

When asked whether the free gowns would help financially, 25-year-old Tarra Solomon grinned.

"Oh my goodness, yes, because dresses are so expensive," said Solomon, a San Clemente resident who is married to a sergeant. "And then you have to get your shoes, and pay for your hair and your nails. It saves a couple hundred dollars, so I think that's really helpful."

Like dozens of others standing nearby, Solomon was holding two dresses that probably each fetched at least \$100 when they were bought new at the mall. One still had a David's Bridal sash attached.

"I picked out an A-line black dress, and a big, red poofy dress," she said with a laugh, holding them up. "I found two great dresses, actually. They weren't picked over ---- they had a lot of selection in there."

Tabrum said most of the gowns came from Working Wardrobes, with donations also arriving from local churches and the Assistance League of Inland North County.

For Stovall, who said she lost 85 pounds in recent months, this year's birthday ball will be her second, even though her husband has been in the Corps since 2005.

"First of all, we didn't have the money, and then I was pregnant. So we just didn't go," she said. "Last year at the ball, I was wearing a size 22 gown, and over the last months I've been working out ... and I actually got my size 14 dress today. I've never been in this size before."

She arrived at the community center in the darkness of 5 a.m. Saturday, after months of discipline and exercise to look good for the ball, but, she said, "It's going to be worth every second of it when I get to that ball and I don't have to be uncomfortable in a dress that's barely fitting me."

Despite the charitable atmosphere, some volunteers characterized the event as more of a duty than a handout, given the sacrifices of Marine Corps families.

Carolyn Brown was helping women find the right pair of shoes in the accessory tent when she paused to explain why she seemed to be having such a good time: "It's just gratifying to be able to give back to the military wives," she said.