

SATURDAY OBSERVER

'Tuxedo: \$700. Shoes: \$100. Dance lessons: \$50.'



Sarah Argent, 17, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'The dancing's been fun, but it's the people that make it worthwhile.'

Warren Brown, 17, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'I had to keep reminding people it's not the Vietnamese Ball.'

Lee Casterton, 17, Grade 12, Colonel By
 'Tuxedo: \$700. Shoes: \$100. Dance lessons: \$50. Stepping on the prime minister's wife's feet: Priceless.'

David daCosta, 18, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'As Jerry Seinfeld said, sometimes the road less travelled, is less travelled for a reason.'

Lauren Edwards, 17, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'It made my least favourite day of the week something to look forward to.'

Andrea Innes, 17, Grade 12, Canterbury High
 'An enchanting evening of elegance and excitement.'

Thomas Montgomery, 16, Grade 12, Immaculata
 'I'm waltzing with belle of the ball.'



Alexandra Keys, 17, Grade 12, Elmwood
 'The experience of a lifetime with the best of people and the best of times — except for when I will most likely spill something down my dress and step on the prime minister's feet.'

Jon Linklater, 17, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'At first I thought I had two left feet ... thank you for the confirmation.'

Cheryl Mason, 18, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'This has been an eye-opening experience that I'll keep forever. And it's all because each one of us teenagers tried.'

Steve MacMillan, 17, Grade 12, Nepean High
 'When people ask me why I did this, I tell them it was for a girl, but we all know that's not true.'

Marielle McGovern, 16, Grade 11, Elmwood
 'This has been a great experience — the people, the dress — it's like a modern-day Cinderella story.'

Olivia McNee, 16, Grade 11, Ashbury College
 'I feel lucky to be a part of such a tradition that is a new and unique experience in my life.'

When it comes to dancing, these young women prefer to lead



Lauren Edwards, left, and Carrie Wallace fall to the floor in laughter after performing a polka. They are two of 26 students who will join Ottawa's glitterati tonight at the National Gallery for the gala of the year.

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Scoop neck, empire waist, embroidered bodice and "cleavage pusher-uppers," will pepper their conversation for weeks.

The bios of the 13 girls chosen as debutantes aren't what you'd expect of a group that works itself into a frenzy over bouffant dresses.

They play hockey, rugby and football. They snowboard, swim and row. They play saxophone, guitar and pound away on drum sets. They volunteer at soup kitchens, organize fundraisers for cancer, coach little girls' hockey. They sit on student councils. They run environmental clubs and multicultural dance clubs at school. They listen to hip hop, rap, rock, punk, techno, folk and country. They talk about foreign policy, developing nations and quote Dylan Thomas with ease. They want to be actresses, journalists, teachers and politicians. They want to backpack in Europe and meditate in Tibet.

And, when it comes to dancing, they prefer to lead.

These young women aren't the demure debutantes of yesteryear — don't let the silk sheaths fool you — they're fiercely independent and headstrong.

If anything, they find it amusing that the opening ceremony was originally designed for Vienna's wealthiest families to introduce their daughters to high society — or as one girl puts it, to display them as "ripe for the picking."

"It's more like we'll be playing a part in a play," says Sarah. "The whole coming out (into society) doesn't have the same meaning to us ... But it's tradition and we appreciate that tradition."

Nowadays, debutantes come from all walks of life — well, almost all.

These girls are the daughters of diplomats, teachers, construction workers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, writers and stay-at-home dads.

While being a debutante is open to everyone under 18, it's definitely not for everyone's budget.

The teens are spared the \$350 cover charge, but many girls will dish out hundreds of dollars for their white gowns, some of which will be purchased second-hand and will cost hundreds more to get dry cleaned and altered. They'll also need long, satin gloves, strappy shoes and sheer stockings. Many will see costs soar after a slew of beauty appointments. And some of the girls will pay for extra dance lessons.

In other words, some will spend up to \$700 for just that one night.

Some are determined to be debutantes again next year, which is how they justify spending \$450 on a dress: It's not for just one occasion but two.

Parents will largely absorb the cost, but some girls will pitch in and others will pay their own way.

Only two were debutantes last year and are already fully outfitted.

Meanwhile, most of the boys waited a few weeks before they even looked into renting a tux. And when they did, some balked at the \$150 price tag.

Among the guys, there was no talk of fairy tales, Prince Charming or glass slippers.

"This feels surreal," says Sarah, her gaze sweeping across 200 wedding gown samples at the Justina McCaffrey warehouse in Hull.

"These are wedding dresses and we're *seventeeeee*," she says, scooping an armful of tulle.

The room is tiny, made smaller by the many racks pushed up against each other that are bursting with billowing gowns protected by plastic.

There's little room for Sarah, Lauren Edwards, their mothers and Cheryl to stand. But the girls are unfazed. With a little more than three weeks to go until the ball, they're determined to find the perfect dress.

"Every step gets funner," says Cheryl. "At first, it was the dance lessons, now this. It keeps getting better."

"It's so neat to do this in our grad year — to do this big, fancy, gala thing."

Amid the explosion of silk, they're like kids in a candy store, with eyes bigger than their pocketbooks. Dresses range from \$200 to \$2,000 — a deal, say the girls, pointing out they typically retail for up to \$6,000.

They aren't in their element, but then again, waltzing isn't in their repertoire.

"We're not the girly-girl, ball-room-dancing type of girls — all three of us are tomboys," says Sarah, who seems to live in blue jeans and mismatched socks and plays in a boys' hockey league.

"It's so funny that we're trying on these gowns and we play hockey and rugby," giggles Lauren.

"Yeah, maybe we should wear our mouth guards," says Sarah, joking it would be a great accessory.

The girls peel off their jeans and slip into silk. They stand in front of the mirror and seem surprised by what they see — not quite women and not quite girls.

Even Sarah's mother, Liz Argent, admits the moment makes her realize her little girl is growing up.

"That's a whole lot of dress," someone points out to Lauren, whose skirt puffs out more than two metres in width.

"Well, I'm a whole lot of woman," she jokes, proceeding to practise a curtsy.

She twirls in front of the mirror, careful not to step on the folds of fabric at her feet. With each spin, she falls deeper into a trance until finally she professes her love for the dress.

But the high is quashed and the crescendo of "oohs" and "ahhs" ends when the saleslady tells her it costs \$1,200.

KIER GILMOUR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN