

## Prom Project makes dreams come true for local students

By Kaitlin Sylvester

The Hastings and Prince Edward Learning Foundation, in collaboration with the Children's Foundation and Quinte Mall, has launched Prom Project 2024, an initiative aimed at breaking down barriers for students, enabling them to fully participate in their graduation and prom events. This program, which has been operational since 2012, took a pause during the pandemic, and its return promises a positive impact on students. The Children's Foundation has assembled a dedicated committee of volunteers, including staff from the HPELF. The first phase, running until March 31, focuses on collecting prom attire from the community, while the second phase involves give-away days, where students can select formal wear at no cost. Each year, several hundred students attend Prom Project events, and this year is expected to be no different. Event organizer Kelly Brace, along with the entire team, is deeply invested in the success of the Prom Project. The initiative aims to provide an equitable experience for graduating students, says Brace. "We believe that everyone deserves to fully participate in all aspects of their school experience. Graduations and proms are the final, culminating events for youth which symbolizes the passage into the next step in their life journey. We want all those who want to participate to be able to do so, and not be excluded due to economic barriers." Programs like the Prom Project hold particular importance for students in rural communities. The program addresses economic barriers, ensuring that every student, regardless of their financial circumstances, can fully participate in these milestone events. Brace says "Given the current economic struggles that many are facing, some students may not have been able to attend their prom if they had to purchase a dress or suit." The Prom Project is asking local residents to donate gently used dresses, suits and separates which will be used to provide a one-of-a-kind 'shopping' experience for the students. The give-away events, planned for April 5 and 6 in Belleville and April 17 in Maynooth are the highlight of the Prom Project. Offering students the opportunity to browse through a curated selection of dresses, suits, and accessories they might not otherwise have had access to. "We wanted access points to Prom Project to be spread out across the region and we are very grateful for the dedicated staff at North Hastings High School and Prince Edward Collegiate Institute for joining the Prom Project committee," said Brace when speaking about the event locations. "We are also working on a location in Northumberland County (details to follow). to allow students who live outside of Belleville, and who would not have been able to travel, to participate closer to home." As the project gears up for the 2024 prom season, the HPELF team extends an invitation to the community to donate formal wear they no longer need to the cause. Donations can be dropped off at Quinte Mall in Belleville, North Hastings High School in Bancroft, and Prince Edward Collegiate Institute in Picton. Through collective efforts, the community can ensure that all graduates have the chance to celebrate their graduation and attend their prom in style. As Brace puts it, "this is time for celebration, for reflection and for hope."