

Star Boutique

Helping Homeless Teens Shine in New York City

by Katie Linek

ICPH received many worthy nominations for our 2016 Beyond Housing Award and chose three outstanding winners which were highlighted in our Spring 2016 issue. In this “Spotlight On ...”, we look at how The Star Boutique is making a difference in the lives of homeless New York City teens, one prom dress at a time — exemplifying solutions beyond housing.

Prom is one of the most exciting nights of many young girls’ teenage years and has become part of the American teen mythology—a chance to dress up and dance the night away with friends. It can also be a very expensive night. What options are there for young women whose families cannot afford a luxury such as a prom dress?

In New York City, where student homelessness is skyrocketing, **The Star Boutique** provides an answer for homeless girls ages 13 to 20 years. This charity-driven pop-up shop (a short-term store) provides clothing, shoes, accessories, makeovers, and mentorship to these teenagers — all provided free of charge.



Participants of the 2016 Love Yourself Boutique received new clothing, shoes, accessories, and more to help them shine with confidence.

The Star Boutique curates three pop-up boutiques each year, including a prom boutique and a back-to-school boutique. Each boutique takes place in a different community space across New York City, and sees an average of 60 girls in attendance. Popular boutiques like the prom-themed one can see as many as 75. There, the girls get to “shop” for items they do not just need, but also like, getting the chance to live the prom fantasy, just like any other teen.

“What we have learned through doing this is that shelters get donations for things, but they do not necessarily cater to style,” explains Tanesha Ingram, director of community engagement for The Star Boutique.

Although The Star Boutique is a 100 percent volunteer-run charity, they emphasize that the young women they serve are not treated like “charity cases.” Instead, they are treated like “stars.”

Shopping for clothes and accessories is just the beginning. The next stage of this star-treatment is a makeover, including nails, hair, and makeup.

The primary mission of The Star Boutique, however, is to promote confidence, empowerment, and sisterhood. That is why each boutique begins with a presentation and activities to support their self-esteem and confidence. This is essential as those experiencing homelessness are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.



As a part of The Star Boutique’s Star Saturday Initiative, former boutique participants were invited to tour the headquarters of Cosmopolitan magazine and meet writers, editors and graphic designers.



Board members Carol Gill, Tanesha Ingram and Founder Danielle Skeen, pictured with Guest Spoken Word artist Arbed Cancel, center, at The Star Boutique’s 2016 Back To School Boutique.

The Star Boutique’s founder Danielle Skeen stresses that young women can leave the boutique looking beautiful on the outside, but if they do not feel beautiful on the inside “... then we have not done our job.”

“The overall goal is to support these girls who are shining through their circumstances,” adds Ingram.

One transgender teen explains, “The Star Boutique was really interesting and I enjoyed every last minute of it. It was an amazing time and I felt comfortable and safe to be myself.”

The idea for The Star Boutique came about when Skeen and Ingram were working with girls living in shelter as part of a mentoring program. They noticed the teens often did not have certain necessities. “It would be cold and they would not have a jacket or a sweater,” explains Ingram.

Seeing this stayed with Skeen, and she founded The Star Boutique a few years later in early 2013. Since then, they have worked with more than 250 girls.

They quickly recognized however, that they needed to do more. “We realized it was not enough just to do these one-time things for them,” says Ingram. “We needed to continue to build relationships.” It was this realization that led to Star Saturdays, when Star Boutique staffers go into shelters and host workshops with the girls to mentor, support, and build relationships with them.

“I was homeless. I lived in shelters. I was always working, but I still felt guilt about being homeless,” explains Ingram. “Being able to support them and tell them, ‘Hey, I was there and now look where I am.’ ... I love being able to share that with them.”

Maintaining communication can be a challenge, however. “They are transitioning—often not even staying in the same schools—so it can be hard for them to commit to participating in a service like The Star Boutique,” says Ingram. Despite the fluid nature of the homeless population, The Star Boutique has a core group of 15–20 girls they are regularly able to keep in contact with through social media and mentoring.

Ingram stresses that providing homeless girls with these services should in no way serve to hide the growing issue of homelessness. “This is not a way to dress up homelessness. There is still an issue. Thousands of young people are walking out of schools every day and walking into shelters.”

In fact, a staggering 105,445 homeless students attended New York City schools in the 2015–16 school year, a 22% jump from the previous year. These numbers represent students living both in shelter and those doubled up with family or friends.

The Star Boutique works to ease the impact of homelessness on even a small percentage of young women. The girls and their families are responding positively.

“A lot of times they come in and they are grumpy, with their coat on, and they do not want to say hello,” Ingram describes. “As they go through the boutique though, they meet new people, they feel the love, they eat, and they feel comfortable. Then they do not want to leave and they are hugging you and smiling, and crying, and saying ‘thank you.’”

“I had an amazing time at the boutique,” says a teen who attended her first event. “I love my dresses. It was a blessing to be there and meet everyone.”

Tanesha continues, “We get emails from moms saying ‘Thank you so much. I did not think I would be able to get a prom dress for my daughter.’”

Due to the work of The Star Boutique, young women experiencing homelessness are able to feel beautiful, confident, and just like any other teenager in America during a traumatic time in their lives. It makes a positive impact on these young women that will last long into adulthood. ■

Star Boutique participants pose for photos after makeovers and trying on prom dresses at The Star Boutiques 2015 Prom Boutique.



Resources

The Star Boutique <http://www.thestarboutique.org> New York, NY.