

# I HOPE YOU *Dance*



LIZ MOSBO VERHAGE



**HOW TWO HIGH-SCHOOL SENIORS HELPED A GROUP OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS HAVE THE TIME OF THEIR LIVES AT THE SPECIAL FRIENDS PROM**

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his past spring, while most of their friends were looking for that certain special someone to go to prom with, Kelsie Williamson and Katie Freeman of Omaha, Nebraska, decided to go with some friends instead. More than forty of their friends, to be exact.

And the prom they attended wasn't held at the Hilton or some other expensive hotel—instead it was held at Community Covenant Church in Omaha, where Katie's mother is the pastor.





Katie Freeman (left) and Kelsie Williamson (right) with one of their special friends

The idea for the prom was born last fall, when Williamson and Freeman were starting their senior year of high school. Williamson had a gym class that included some students with special needs. As she got to know them, Williamson learned that while these students loved to dance, few of them planned to attend Homecoming.

"I knew that the special-needs students loved music and dancing," Williamson says, "and would have a great time at Homecoming. I approached some of my friends to see if they would help me make Homecoming a reality for these special students and most of them, including Katie, said yes."

On the night of Homecoming, Martha Freeman, Katie's mother, hosted a dinner before the dance for Katie, Kelsie, and their friends. "We had hors d'oeuvres, pictures, and dinner at the Freemans' house, and then went off to dance the night away," Williamson says. "Everyone had such a great time. I don't think the smiles could have been any wider that night."

After seeing how well Homecoming went, Williamson wondered if there was a way for her friends and other students with special-needs to be able to experience prom—an event that many students consider a highlight of their high-school experience. But that did not seem possible, says Williamson. The need for medical supervision, anxiety from overcrowding, and other concerns, she says, usually prevent many young people with developmental disabilities from attending.

"I thought, 'Why not give them their own prom?'" says Williamson. "I approached Katie the next day at school

with my idea and she went for it. And the rest as they say is history."

Naming the event "The Special Friends Prom" (SFP), Williamson and Freeman worked over the winter and spring to pull it together. They sent letters to the parents and teachers of local special-needs students explaining the SFP and asked for their initial support. Freeman and Williamson also began selecting other students to be helpers at the prom. A local bank set up an account, free of charge, to hold the prom's assets and cash donations.

An important step in making the prom financially secure occurred when a member of Community Covenant,

who works in public relations, got Freeman and Williamson in touch with a local newspaper. The newspaper ran a feature article about the upcoming event. After the article was published, many businesses and individuals sent donations, including the flowers, centerpieces, photographer, and some of the decorations used at the prom.

"Many businesses were small but were run by people with big hearts," says Freeman. "Other times we received an attached note indicating a connection [the donor had with] someone with special needs."

As they planned the event, Freeman was in charge for finding a space for

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the prom, as well as a disc jockey (DJ). She approached the church leadership at Community Covenant, and the church agreed to lend their facility to the cause. Additionally, church members helped decorate, set up, serve, and clean up at the event. A friend of Freeman's in Community Covenant's youth group served as the DJ.

Finally, the night of the prom arrived. On Saturday, April 21, a group of forty students with special needs, from four different schools attended along with thirty-five high-school students serving as helpers, members of Community Covenant, some students' family members, and a few medical aides.

The prom was covered by the *Omaha World-Herald*, several local radio stations, and two television stations. During a live television interview during the prom with KETV Channel 7, Scott Pixler, whose son Nate was attending the prom, broke down in front of the camera. "I didn't expect to feel this way," he said, "but as a parent of a handicapped child you think this kind of thing is something that you lose. I can't believe that these girls cared enough to do this for all of these kids." As the interview drew to a close, Nate, a sophomore at Millard North who has Down Syndrome, asked the reporter if she would dance with him.

One of the highlights of the prom occurred when the theme song, "I Hope You Dance," by LeAnn Womack was played. "All of the students spontaneously lined up across the front of the sanctuary," says Williamson, "and stood swaying arm in arm. It was such a neat and powerful moment. There were very few dry eyes left by the end of the song."

The prom decorations stayed in place for the next morning worship service, say Freeman, and many people who attended shared their experience with the congregation. The sermon focused on the lasting affects on



June at the Freeman home. Students who attended the SFP attended a picnic together to share memories of the dance and pick up their pictures from the prom. And plans are already underway for next year's "Second Annual Millard SFP." Thanks to the generosity of local donors, there are already enough funds in place to hold the event.

After the SFP, the Optimist Club, an international organization, contacted Williamson and Freeman and asked them to write a manual for replicating the SFP in other locations. The Optimist Club will print the manuals and pass them out to their clubs, and will help find sponsors and hosts if necessary. A key component to the success of the prom was that it began and remained student-driven, a point that Freeman and Williamson will center their manual around. Although Freeman and Williamson are both headed off to college this fall, they have already made plans to return to next year's prom as helpers instead of hostesses.

Martha Freeman says that the success of SFP was due in part to the organizational skills of her daughter and Williamson, but also due to their hearts.

"The driving force of the prom was the the girls' compassion for and friendship with these young people with special needs," she says. "Katie and Kelsie are also well-organized, natural leaders, but the trust that the girls had already built with the students, parents, and teachers made them all support and attend the event."

Williamson says that they just wanted to do something special for their friends. The prom "took a lot a lot of hard work, countless late nights, and most of all a lot of love," she says. "It was our friendship with these students that made it possible and successful. They were our friends and we wanted to give them the best night that we could." □

those who attended the event for the kingdom of God.

"I can't say enough good things about Community Covenant," says Williamson. "They were absolutely wonderful. There are many churches that probably wouldn't want a couple of teenagers hosting a prom in their sanctuary. But not Community Covenant—they embraced the idea and supported us however they could."

Martha Freeman, who helped with some details in the planning of the prom, says she was proud to attend the event, both as a pastor, and as Katie's mother. She says that the church needs to keep "a sharp eye focused outward into the community to see what needs exist that we have the potential to address."

"Whenever we can open our doors and our hearts to the community," she says, "it's good for the kingdom. There is so much that we can do with our buildings and our people to help share Christ with others. In the case of the Special Friends Prom, all of us would be quick to confess that we were given far more than we gave."

Katie Freeman says that organizing the prom was one way she put her faith into action in her life. "For me, SFP was an opportunity to serve God," she says. "I'm not good at telling people about Jesus, but I can stamp invitations, punch confetti, and dance the chicken dance. And in so doing, I can honor people whom society doesn't have the time to get to know."

Freeman and Williamson also hosted a follow-up event to the prom in