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Latest senior party game: Be altruistic to your school

Article by: , Star Tribune

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Fueled by burritos and iced coffees, Minneapolis Southwest High School's 340 seniors celebrated graduation last week with the now-standard fare of all-night festivities: casino games, karaoke, a hypnotist and henna tattoos.

But in a corner room, away from the games and blaring pop music, a small group found a quiet escape, tying fleece blankets and making care packages for a children's home.

Similar volunteer projects are the latest fast-spreading addition to all-night school parties that have evolved over the years to include, at some schools, car giveaways and even trips to Disney World.

Now parents are coaxing graduating seniors to mix fun at the final bash with one last dose of altruism.

"It sends out a message that it's not always just about the party," Rosemount parent Teri Temple said. "You can have fun and give back, too."

Eden Prairie, Rosemount and Edina high schools have included giving back at locked-in, drug-free overnight parties for years.

Last year Shakopee added a service project. This year, Minneapolis Southwest, Apple Valley and Stillwater high schools added them to their final festivities.

"I decided there was no place you couldn't do a service project," said Welcome Jerde, a Minneapolis parent and founder of a local service nonprofit. "It's about being together with your friends and having a good time. [But] it's a time they can also give of themselves."

A quiet something to do

Last Friday night, teens took over Chaska Community Center, leaping into its expansive pool or bouncing from room to room to play casino games or get massages. A darkened room was energized by colorful lights and pop music as seniors socialized, scarfed down burritos and readied for karaoke.

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In a small room down the hall, Corwin Amyx and a few students quietly tied fleece blankets and filled packages with items such as toothbrushes and teddy bears for kids at St. Joseph's Home for Children in Minneapolis.

"I don't necessarily want to dance all night or listen to other people sing," Amyx said as she put together a blue football-themed blanket. "It's more people than I care for."

The 18-year-old said she sought out the room, looking not necessarily for a do-gooder project but a quieter activity. At times she and a couple of friends were the only ones there, a sharp contrast to the pool area. But as the night wore on a steady trickle -- mostly female -- turned out, drawn by curiosity or a calmer respite.

"It doesn't have to be about the ideal 'Yes, we're giving back,'" she said. "It's here, it's something to do."

Becca Chapin stopped to work on a fleece blanket between snacks and getting a henna tattoo. "I think it's just another fun thing to do on the last night," she said. "A service project can be so simple."

As the party was just getting going around 1

a.m., senior Perry Anderson said the arts activity was keeping her awake.

"We have six hours," she said. "We have time to do a lot of things."

Blankets and birthday kits

Edina High School claims to have been first in the nation to host a senior all-night lock-in party 60 years ago. Service projects go back at least six years. This year there was talk of scrapping the effort due to fewer organizers. Parent Kit Olson argued for keeping it.

"For some kids, that's a really meaningful part," she said. "These kids have a tradition of being involved."

Next Tuesday, 500 Edina seniors will tie fleece blankets, compile birthday supply kits for a local food shelf and write thank-you notes to teachers.

Eden Prairie seniors have two similar projects at this Friday's party, in and among a carnival, casino and spa. It's a necessary activity to senior Emily Palmer, who volunteers at a food shelf that will get birthday supply kits.

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"I know how it's important for these things, just to give back because we're doing so much for ourselves," she said. "It's not like it takes the whole night. It's a real simple, easy thing to do."

Parent party planner Anne Walbrun said service projects have been included at Eden Prairie's senior parties for at least seven years and have been popular party stops. "There's a real focus on giving back for these kids," she said.

Aiding troops, food shelves

At Stillwater, 700 seniors will attend their party on Saturday and write letters to members of the military and hospitalized children. In Shakopee, seniors took time at their party last weekend to write letters to troops, a service project begun last year that resulted in 250 letters.

Rosemount High School seniors collect food for local food shelves in exchange for discounted party tickets or a free raffle ticket at the party.

At Apple Valley High School, half of the money raised by parents for the senior party is buying about \$1,000 in books for the school's library. Parents inspired by Edina's

service project also added food shelf donations to their big bash this Friday. If it's successful, parent Sharon O'Toole said, they'll expand it to a bigger project next year.

"This plays well with this generation of kids," she said. "They're more cognizant of being aware we need to help others even though graduation can be me, me, me."

Cutting back on the swag

Over the years many parties have given away prizes donated by businesses. In Stillwater, a raffle sends lucky students home with a donated used car or trip for four to Disney World. But a cutback in business contributions has led to a scaling-back in goodies, as well.

In Wayzata costs were shaved about 8 percent this year by having parents donate money or supplies, and giving away \$5 or \$10 gift cards to every senior instead of raffling off TVs or computers. Neighboring Minnetonka and Hopkins schools also stuck with gift cards or small gifts.

"I wish I had larger prizes," Hopkins parent Barb Hirshberg said. "This was an unusual year; it was harder to get donations."

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Next year, she said, they'll add a service project. "There is a real shift in feeling that we can give no matter where we are."

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A large advertisement banner with an orange and white background. On the left is a black and white photo of Jonny Lang playing an electric guitar. To the right of the photo, the text reads: "JONNY LANG FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2 ON SALE SATURDAY, JUNE 25". Further right is the "Mystic Lake" logo with "CASINO • HOTEL" underneath and "mysticlake.com" at the bottom. At the very bottom of the banner, in small text, it says "Owned and Operated by the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community".

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