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First-generation seniors at Hamtramck High adopt culture of prom

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It's hard enough to explain prom to your old-country parents. Toss in a boat ride, and they're downright lost.

A boat? Why a boat? Are you leaving?

Actually, it's another sign that the kids are here to stay.

Hamtramck High School will hold its senior prom Thursday night aboard the Ovation, a 138-foot yacht out of St. Clair Shores. It's the culmination of four years of work by an absurdly diverse bunch of students from at least three continents with one common goal:

The classic American high school bash.

"You tell 'em, 'It's something seniors do,'" says Mohamed Algehim, 18, the class secretary. He was born here, but his parents are from Yemen, and the part about the tuxedo took some work, too.

"If you're the first child, it's harder to get across," says Emina Alic, 18, the Bosnia-born class president. "If your brothers and sisters already went, your parents tell you you're going."

The 200 current seniors had read the memo early on. "There's competition between classes," says class historian Sabbir Noor, 17, whose roots go back to Bangladesh, and even before any of his friends had their learner's permits, they were driven to do something special.

So they held bake sales and car washes. They sold coffee and doughnuts. They starred in an improvisational comedy show. The tab for four hours afloat with a disc jockey, a casual dinner and a sundae bar is \$11,000, and, collectively, they came up with \$7,000 of it.

Now there's nothing left to do but pick up the rented tuxedos and chant "party, party, party," in a whole bunch of languages.

'We're all family'

In a lot of ways, Hamtramck still feels like a Polish enclave. The high school sits only blocks from the Jurkiewicz & Wilk and Krot funeral homes, and a Polish-American resource center called the Piast Institute will be dockside Thursday night handing out gifts and promoting drug- and alcohol-free celebrations.

From the front of the classroom, though, it feels like lunchtime at the United Nations. Art teacher Veronica Lassen, the senior class adviser, says the district has tallied 33 languages in its schools, and she thinks the counters missed a few.

"We're all something," says Algehim, and they all absorb at least a little bit of what everybody else is. "Two kids will be having a conversation and you'll pick up a word and think, 'That sounds interesting.'"

The net effect, says vice president Ashraf Bakth, 18, is that "we're all family." Sergeant at arms Brandon Wright, 18, who's African-American and Chaldean and who's the only officer with U.S. roots more than one generation deep, is wearing a class of 2010 sweat shirt. Silkscreened on the back are the signatures of almost everyone who'll graduate with him.

Differences will disappear

A social services notice on the wall in the main office asks whether the student reading it is living "in a car, on the street, or somewhere that people don't usually live."

Lassen knows plenty who are.

One senior, a ward of the state, got the money for his prom ticket from his social worker. "We have kids," she says, "Bengalis especially, who rent a room or a bed by themselves while they're finishing up school."

It's different strokes for different cultures. In some Arab families, Lassen says, girls aren't allowed to participate at all. Pressed for a number, the class officers counted four or five who might instead attend a girls-only dance at Wayne State where they can wear prom dresses and enjoy themselves with no men in the room.

Aboard the Ovation, the commonalities will be far more evident than the differences: Long dresses, bow ties, and hip-hop music busting from the sound system.

After four years of work, the class of 2010 is ready to make a splash.

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