

Prom planning evolves through the decades

Prom couple 1985 | *Photo courtesy of Advancement Office*



Clara Martinez /
Lead Culture Editor

An evening of ball gowns and tuxedos and picking food from delicate silver trays, it is the one night a year when classmates in formal wear might collide on the dance floor. Prom, an annual social event for Grade 11 and 12 students, will be held at the Waldorf Hilton May 13. While the school has arranged proms since 1960, the event has undergone transformational changes in the location, food and administrative team in the last few decades.

Planning

Administrative Assistant Shahira Moola spearheads the planning process for Prom, including making decisions on the venue, food, chaperones and music. Because of the increase in class sizes this year, Moola said she had to find a new venue that could accommodate more people.

Director of Student Life James Perry is also at the forefront of organizing the event. Before the disruption of COVID-19 that canceled Prom during the 2020-21 school year, he said the venues would alternate in hopes that students would attend for both

Grades 11 and 12 and receive a different experience.

“We just want to give you a different venue, so it feels different,” Perry said. “You don’t have the same experience twice.”

In addition, Moola said the budget changed during the 2021-22 school year as a result of rising prices from inflation, although Prom is still free for students to attend. The event used to be ticketed until 2014 or 2015 according to Moola, which is one factor that has affected the scale of the event.

Attendance

Moola said there is a tendency for students to leave around 8:30 p.m. or 9 p.m., and it’s “quite sad” for the amount of time the administration spends planning.

“We want everyone to just enjoy it, and also to stay,” Moola said. “That’s something we’ve had challenges in the past is that we spend so much money on it, and we put so much effort into it, and people are gone within, you know, a couple of hours.”

Similarly, Ella Jackson-Drexler (’23) said one thing she wishes she could change about Prom is the amount of time people spend at the event itself.

“I’d like to see as many people come but also people to stay more and not go to After Prom as early,” Jackson-Drexler said. “[Prom] was a fun experience. It just ended quite soon.”

World Languages Teacher Victoria Hamadache began teaching at the school in the 1990s and took on the role of organizing Prom for 10 years until Moola and former Publications Teacher Rhianon West stepped into the position. Hamadache said, in the past, students would stay at Prom until closing time.

“They used to stay till way after midnight,” Hamadache said. “The teachers would be sitting down, you know, bathing their sore feet from wearing high heels all evening and having a coffee before going home.”

Student input

Hamadache said in the years that she organized Prom, the process was a “whole year event of preparation.” She said students were heavily involved in accompanying the organizers to taste food, scout venues and choose music.

“I felt that we were a big family really organizing it,” Hamadache said.

Furthermore, Moola said while students used to be heavily involved in the planning process, there has been declining interest from student groups such as the Student Council to organize a Prom Committee in recent years. She said the planning team used to invite upperclassmen to look at menu options during conference time, but in recent years there has been low attendance at optional

Students’ Prom dresses | *Photos courtesy of Allie Garbett (’24), Kaelen Friedlander (’24) and Elena Alexander (’23)*



Prom Committee 1993 | *Photo courtesy of Advancement Office*Group picture 2010 | *Photo courtesy of Advancement Office*

planning meetings.

“We’re always open to student voice in the Prom,” Moola said. “We just haven’t had willing participants.”

Poppy Fordu (’24) said reintroducing student voice into the planning process is crucial. She said students should have the opportunity to help plan the event, which might improve engagement and longer attendance.

“Most of it should be done by students, but I think the school can have restrictions,” Fordu said. “Students should have input about what we want to see at Prom and what we think would really draw us.”

Nonetheless, Perry said students’ general commentary is that they enjoyed attending Prom.

“They kind of have low expectations and then generally they go ‘Wow, that was a lot more fun than I thought,’” Perry said. “The feedback is pretty good.”

Over the years, Moola said the planning group has “refined” Prom over the years based on student feedback to adapt to what was most successful.

“We always see what worked and what didn’t work, and take that forward into the next into the next Prom,” Moola said.

As such, Moola said the photo booth has been most popular among students, and the introduction of a sushi bar a few years ago was largely unsuccessful. She said they have not repeated it

because “it felt like a really big waste” when most was not eaten. Instead, Moola said the only food being served at the upcoming Prom will be canapés.

Purpose

Under the designation of an American school, Perry said there is value in upholding certain American traditions for students who come from myriad backgrounds. While many British schools hold Prom events for senior students, the concept developed in American universities in the late nineteenth century, only becoming popularized within high schools in the 1950s, according to Time Magazine.

While Perry said the idea of Prom may seem “silly or unnecessary to some,” it is a valuable opportunity to connect outside of the stressors related to school.

“Sometimes ASL can be a pretty transient place, a lot of people coming and going and sometimes unfortunately, it’s so busy that it can even feel transactional at times,” Perry said. “Anytime we have events ... where students are just having fun together, I think it’s a win.”

Likewise, Hamadache said Prom “holds a great traditional value for this school” in the history that it holds.

Coming from a school in the U.S., Fordu said Prom at ASL

seems less significant to the student body than at other schools.

“In public school in America, it’s like one of the biggest things in the school year and people plan months ahead of time,” Fordu said. “Here, it’s usually, people plan like a few weeks ahead or like a few, like two months ahead, and it’s more quiet than a public school.”

Jackson-Drexler said the Prom atmosphere in the U.K. seems more “understated and classy” than at most American schools. In addition, she said she enjoyed seeing the variety of dresses, suits, shoes and accessories.

“Everyone got to dress up as much as they want, as little as they want,” Jackson-Drexler said. “It was really cool to see that, people’s individual style coming out.”

Due to the international student body at the school, Fordu said students may benefit from being given more explanation about the purpose of the event and the experience at American schools.

Regardless of the planning process or how it compares to other schools, Moola said the ultimate goal of the organization team is for all students to bond with their friends and peers in their final years at the school.

“It’s about inclusivity, really, that’s the driving force,” Moola said. “We want everyone to feel loved and welcomed and to be able to create like memories with, you know, with their fellow students.”

World Languages Teacher Victoria Hamadache reflects on the evolution of prom



Photo courtesy of Grace Hamilton (’23)

In its earliest days, Hamadache said Prom was held in the school gym with student-organized bands as live music with a “posh sit-down dinner with live music and disco.” When she started teaching at the school, Prom had increased both in scale and in price.

Hamadache said Prom used to be held at the Savoy Hotel, a five-star hotel near Covent Garden. Another location included the Ritz, which Hamadache said was “just so exquisite.” She said the event then moved from luxury hotels to large venues with dinner included, and now serves bite-size food options.

Hamadache said she is glad the prom is free of cost for upperclassmen to attend because the system of each student purchasing £60-70 tickets restricted attendance.

“It was quite prohibitive for some families and I completely understand that, but I really do miss those days, the days of the Savoy,” Hamadache said.