

44 dresses

SD 44 Principal Lisa Upton
Relates How Not All
Cinderella Stories
Must End with a Ball Gown

It began at the Grade 7 Farewell event, when Principal Lisa Upton noticed that there were children who could benefit from support in finding clothing to help them express who they are as individuals. “It came up for me as a theme in our work,” said Lisa. “I wanted the children to see themselves – and their success – reflected in the school celebration, and not to be caught up in a specific idea around what kids should be wearing. At the beginning of this very important transition, I wanted to make sure that they had clothing that represents them as an athlete, or an artist, or a dancer or as someone very social, rather than dressing up to meet someone else's expectation of who they are or who they should be.”



The concept of 44Dresses evolved from a courteside conversation when Lisa and another mother were watching their sons play basketball. “Elena Grant had a store called Sofiabella in Edgemont Village, and the purpose of her store was age-appropriate clothing for girls, tween apparel. I’ve worked with kids for many years, and I’ve noticed how at their farewell dance, they end up wearing these ‘crazy-high’ heels, shoes they’ve never worn before. They need to learn to walk in them, but they are also internalizing that this is ‘getting ready for high school’. That concerned me. Elena and I were talking, and I asked what she did with the samples that she received in the store, and clothing that needs repairs or when something is defective – and was there a way that I could get access to her suppliers, to help get kids the clothing that they might like to choose. Between the two of us, we came up with this idea that we could have a collection site, access local high schools in North Vancouver and ask families to donate clothing they no longer wear.”

The program was well-received in the community. “I was fortunate to work with supportive staff. We had a nurturing nest for this community initiative to launch. 44Dresses has been held at the Education Services Centre, which is the North Vancouver School District headquarters. They have this beautiful floor called The View: on one end is a beautiful ocean view, and the other end is a mountain view. We decorated the room, and Fresh Street Market for several years has supplied the food donation so when kids come in it looks like a party. Another company donated balloons – we try to keep it age appropriate – and there are these beautiful sandwiches and treats and fruit and veggie platters. We want to make sure that kids feel like their whole being is welcomed at the event. There’s music playing and wonderful different types of clothing available for them to choose from.”

"Congratulations! Such an amazing thing you have done! You should feel proud of yourself for putting smiles onto so many beautiful faces. These are the things that bring communities and friends together and make the world a better place."
- 44Dresses Parent

In their first year, the 44Dresses team connected with the Cinderella Project, and learned a lot from attending their event, including what a setup might look like. “For our event, we had our own version of fairy godmothers and fairy godfathers – we had parent volunteers welcome the kids and talk to them, ask them ‘who are you, what do you like to do, do you play a sport, what makes you feel really strong, what makes you feel really proud, what kind of clothes do you like to wear? No: you don’t have to wear a dress.’ Over the years it’s grown and changed; we are LGBTQ friendly, and we have all kinds of kids trying on all kinds of different clothing. We’re still staffed by parent volunteers,

but now we have Grade 12 students come in. As Elena has moved on from her business, we’ve worked with schools and their Grade 12 student leadership groups to collect clothing at their home high schools and have students help to host the event. That makes it even better. Now in our seventh year, it’s great that some of the first group of Grade 7s were coming back as Grade 12s and seeing their own former elementary school friends. It’s a full circle, when a Grade 12 student can give kids the support that they wish that maybe they’d had.”

44Dresses has had great support from SD44 Superintendent Mark Pearmain and team. 2019 marked the first year 44Dresses moved from a private event supported by the District to a formal School District event. The event is important in the community and has a broad reach. “When we first



started, we had families coming from all over, and that was great. When you think about it, one in five kids in our province lives in poverty and there are lots of people who benefit from all kinds of support. And it’s a realization that there can be a lot of social pressure. Imagine that you are going through major personal or family changes that have financial pressures, and also having the pressure to have two outfits: one for the ceremony and one for the dinner dance. We want kids to be focussing on feeling good, and the families to know that we are there to support them.”

The project is also a green initiative with its support of recycling, reusing and sharing, and it is reflective of the guiding theme of the North Vancouver School District: learning, sharing and growing together. And, as Lisa observes, it’s an important component of a natural cycle. “Launching kids in Grade 7 with a farewell event, it’s about connecting to the next cycle of education and community. You’re making sure that the kids understand that you as an educator care





"I wanted to take some time to thank you ever so much for the wonderful experience of finding a dress for my daughter's grade 7 grad. She was over the moon that she found a yellow dress that fit her so well AND the delight of finding shoes and jewelry to go with it. The care we felt made the whole experience AMAZING"

- 44Dresses Parent

about them as a whole person, not just as a learner. We care about who you are on the inside. We care about who you value, who you care for: we know that school is just one part of your life, and it's just as important to be an artist or a singer or an athlete, so we care about connecting all the different parts of the whole and nurturing that from the beginning. Supporting kids as they go into high school, that's really important to me. I want them to recognize some of the adults they may have met through 44Dresses as they go into their high school. We really protect the privacy of the students who engage in 44Dresses, and we involve the Grade 12 students because they are not going to be at the school the next year. But it all fits well with our school district commitment to support the transition to high school."

Lisa has some words of advice for educators who may be interested in launching a similar project. "Look at existing systems in your school district, ones that are already in place with people who are already doing good work. Listen and watch for expressions of need from schools or from students. Lean on your colleagues – people want to help, and they want to make a difference for kids. We have people who come and volunteer as seamstresses on Boutique Day, so if a child finds an outfit that they really love but it needs a special touch — a bow here, or something there — then the child can leave with their perfect outfit. For some alterations, I'll collect the outfit and take it to the child at their school. People have big hearts: I think I would go into it assuming that people all want to feel connected."

For Lisa, 44Dresses is also a symbol of the way that BC school leaders connect with students. "I'm so grateful to be part of a community of educators provincially – and in our School District – that really want to know who kids are. This is just one way that we connect with our students as individuals, and I really value the different ways of connecting with people. This has helped us to launch students through a shared celebration. We call it 44Dresses, but it's not just about dresses: it's about so much more."

 @44_dresses