

How to Start Your Own Project

We're delighted that you are thinking about starting a similar project in your own local community and are happy to share some of our experience and suggestions with you.

The first thing to consider is whether there is a need for a project like this in your community. You may wish to contact school principals, grad class counselors and community youth organizations to ask their thoughts on such a project. Decide how many students you realistically think you can help in your inaugural year and decide what your catchments area will be (i.e. will you be helping out one specific City, or a group of towns/municipalities, or will you be defining your area as helping only a certain group of schools). Also decide if you will be helping both young men and young women. Once that is decided, you'll need to pick a name.

The first thing to do is to pick a name. Unfortunately, you can't use The Cinderella Project name in Canada because we are registered in B.C. as a Society and federally as a Charity under this name. Just use your imagination and something magical will come!

The next thing to do is to find some people to help you in your new venture and form an executive committee. Once you do that, we would recommend that the following sub-committees be formed to deal with each area of the project:

- Media
- Donations (excluding used clothing)
- Transportation
- Drop-offs
- Clothing - Inventory
- Storage
- Referrals
- Boutique Day
- Communications
- Fundraising/corporate sponsorship

The number of committee members will be determined by the size of your project. Our Executive Committee is usually 8-10 people for a project that helps 150-200 students per year.

Some of the tasks to be performed by each committee might include:

MEETINGS

The group as a whole should start meeting in September, and meet once a month until February. Then there should be weekly meetings, with each sub-committee giving an update of their progress. An action plan for what needs to be accomplished before the next meeting should be written out at each meeting and included in the minutes. We are often asked whether you have to be an official charity or not. You don't have to be, but if you do incorporate as a society, you are then able to provide individuals/organizations with official tax receipts for their donation. In order to obtain charitable status your project must first incorporate as a Society in your province.

MEDIA

Write a press release to be sent to community papers, major papers, local TV and local radio (community service announcements). The release should describe the project, explain the need for help, give listings of drop-off locations, give a contact phone number and web address (if available) for more information and questions. Be specific about what kind of donations you need. Press releases should be sent well before the Boutique Day and can be resent after a couple of months depending on response and/or if there is a fundraising event happening.

Organize press (papers, TV, radio) for the day of Boutique Day. Send a bulletin to those media invited indicating times that they are allowed to be there. Make it very clear that they must leave prior to the event starting and will only be able to interview, film, photograph a few select students who have agreed to be spokespersons for the project. From our point of view, it is important that the student's participation in the project be able to do so on a confidential basis. Therefore, out of respect for this, we ask the media to leave before the students arrive. Be aware the media may also want interviews with the organizers.

Be the contact person for the students who volunteer to be the spokespersons for the project. They may be asked for interviews prior to the Boutique Day and definitely on the day of. They should be briefed about what is going to happen, know that they must show up early, and be aware of the implications of being on television.

DONATIONS

Committee members should attempt to obtain as many in-kind donations as possible. For example...hair style certificates and make up applications for the day of their actual prom, jewelry, new dresses, make-up, hair products, tuxedos, shirts, ties, shoes, suits, men's dress socks, gloves, lingerie, evening bags, shawls, dry-cleaning certificates, hangers, dress racks, stockings, hair accessories, storage space, clothing steamers etc...basically anything that you get will be useful. Monetary donations are particularly helpful as then you have the ability to purchase needed items, etc. Committee members should be willing to "pound the pavement" asking for donations. A letter similar to the press release and a business card should be given to anyone that you ask for donations.

TRANSPORTATION

Arrange for transportation of clothing from the drop-off locations to storage facility. If there are continual drop-offs as opposed to specific "drop-off days", this may have to be done ever couple of weeks.

Transportation of all items from the storage location to the location for Boutique Day must also be arranged. Look into having a moving company donate a move.

DROP-OFFS

Attempt to arrange as many locations around your city for "continual drops". Suggestions include retail stores, art studios, churches, high school offices, YMCA offices and community recreation centres etc. The best locations are those with weekend hours and where someone is available to accept donations. The contact at the continual drop-off locations should have a phone number for the Transportation Committee so that they can request a pick-up when necessary. If having continual drop off locations is not an option, consider having "drop off days", where volunteers can have tables at well-advertised locations i.e. community centers on 2-3 weekend days.

CLOTHING

As clothing arrives it needs to be sorted for "keepers". You will receive A LOT of unsuitable clothing. These should be donated to community groups, church sales, high school drama department, theatre groups etc. These should be done on a regular basis, to keep the task manageable. Remember you are trying to collect items that a grad would want to wear to their graduation/prom.

"Keepers" also need to be sorted to determine if dry cleaning is necessary or any mending. This committee is responsible for taking the dresses to be cleaned and picking them up. You should be able to get enough certificate donations so that the dry cleaning is free. Some of the keepers may need a small amount of work. Committee members should try to find a seamstress who is willing to donate a few hours to fix small rips, add buttons, remove tacky bows etc. Try a local sewing club or fashion school for volunteers.

In our experience, to successfully supply 100 girls with a dress in their size, you will need a minimum of 300 good dresses. Usually a choice of at least 3 dresses per student will be appropriate. We collect dresses from size 0-40.

STORAGE

It is important to **find storage prior to donations starting**. This could be someone's unused basement or a donated "storage locker". It is important that the storage is dry, accessible and appropriate for having groups of people periodically accessing the storage for drop offs and inventory of donations.

REFERRALS

Initially a decision must be made as to the number of students that you wish to participate in the program each year. The Vancouver project started with 100 and has since decided that 150 will be the maximum. Out of that number there are usually about 40 boys. A suggestion is to start out small and see how things go the first year and then you can re-evaluate.

The referral process can be done independently or through a social service agency. Independently you need to develop a referral form and letter that can be faxed or e-mailed to school counselors, school administration and social/youth workers. We would suggest compiling a data base of all the high schools in your city and finding out the contact information for the Grade 12 counsellor, Grad Sponsor and Principal (and then updating it each year). In our experience, we have asked that the referrals be completed and submitted by the above-mentioned, not parents or students. If we receive inquiries from students, parents or neighbours we ask that they speak to the student's guidance counselor who will submit a referral form. The referral form should include: Date of application, student's name, gender, age, school, clothing and shoe size, name of school/agency making the referral, and person making the referral, their position, e-mail address, phone number, and reason for referral. These referrals need to be as detailed as possible. The form should also include your organization's contact information, phone, fax and e-mail.

Somewhere on the form you should explain that often more applications are received than your project is able to assist, therefore each application is looked at individually and that the referring person will also be contacted as part of the evaluation process. Also mention that the contents of each application is confidential.

Once the form is completed the referring person should return the form to the referral committee. Your committee then needs to contact the referring person to discuss the application. Some of the questions that you might ask are: Is this student graduating this year? Is there financial need? What is this student's circumstances? Does the school cover the grad fees for this student, are there other siblings, is the family on social assistance, would this student attend grad without assistance, does the student work? Gather as much information as possible to help make your decision. Once the committee has made a decision as to whether the student is accepted into the project, let the referring person know as soon as possible – the students are always very anxious to know!

Once a list of accepted students is established, an invitation to the Boutique Day needs to be prepared. It must state the location, date, and time that the student can come and select their graduation/prom outfit. It is a good idea to ask that the students bring ID and their invitation to the event. These invitations should be e-mailed or faxed to the referring person for them to distribute to the accepted student.

It is a good idea to stagger the arrivals. Also, you might want to say that the student can bring one guest - either a family member or their counselor. Encourage counselors to come to Boutique Day as having the counsellors see and experience the event will enable them to have a better idea for the following year about what the project is all about.

Another question on the referral form could be: "Do you think that this student would be interested in being a spokesperson for the project? If, yes, the referring counselor should be contacted and then by someone from the Media Committee to discuss the role that they would play (in TV interviews) and if their family would consent. Ideally you should have 2 girls and 2 boys as the spokespersons.

BOUTIQUE DAY (the Event)

Choose a location accessible by transit and for persons with disabilities. First step is to decide on a location and date for the event. Boutique Day should occur at least 2-3 weeks prior to your city's first high school prom/commencement. In our community, we try to hold it on a Sunday in mid-April. If possible, the space for Boutique Day should be donated at a well know hotel. We are grateful for the ongoing sponsorship of a major Marriott hotel as we find we need at least 3500-4000 sq. ft. of ballroom space. It should have tables and chairs that you can use, should have an area for as many separate change rooms as possible. Mirrors on the walls are perfect, but can also be brought in. Ideally, the room needs to be accessible the day or night before for set-up and decoration. Vancouver's event has traditionally been held on a Sunday in April from 12-5 pm, with media kids coming in at 11 am. You will need quite a bit of time the day before to set-up.

A large group of volunteers is needed for Boutique Day. For example if you are expecting 100 girls you will need at least 50 volunteers. Vancouver usually has over 200 volunteers. These volunteers will be in charge of each of the stations that will be set-up, i.e. dresses, shoes, accessories, jewelry, men's wear, front desk etc. Vancouver also has volunteers from hairdressing and make-up schools to give the students some ideas for their special day. You will also need volunteers to act as personal shoppers ("Fairy Godparent") - each student is assigned a personal shopper to help them make their choices. From our point of view, this is the most important part of the experience. For many of these students they don't have someone in their lives that can lift them up, make them feel special and allow them to be the centre of attention for a magical afternoon.

As the day is long, especially for the volunteers, the event should have some food. Try to get this donated as well. Many of the students will be on lunch programs at school because they live in poverty. Each student will need a large paper bag to go "shopping" with, again, try for donations.

The set-up for the event can be as simple or elaborate as you like. Suggestions include large banners with your charity name and main donors, balloons, fairy lights on the tables, table cloths etc. You will need several tables and clothing racks to display the clothing on.

Any donations of make-up, toiletries or odds and ends can be assembled as gift bags to give to the students as they leave. They love this!!

Be creative! Host an event that works best for your community!

COMMUNICATIONS

Once the press release goes out, and the stories are in the paper, you will start to receive phone calls with people wanting information. We suggest that an independent phone line for the project be used. People who phone should hear information about the project, perhaps upcoming events or drop-of locations. This system can cut back on the number

of people leaving a message and expecting a call back. You should also have a fax line available. For us, a dedicated cell phone has worked well.

In conjunction with the message a web site or e-mail address needs to be set-up and updated regularly. Try to find someone who knows how to do this and is willing to donate a few hours a week to update it. Once the initial pages are done, the weekly commitment should be minimal. They should describe your project, drop-off locations, items for donation and should have e-mail addresses listed. These e-mail inquiries should be answered on a weekly basis.

Remember: there are all kinds of different ways to create magic – we started out “flying by the seat of our pants” for our first Boutique Day in 2000. You know your community best – so be creative [and let us know if you do start a project so we can add you to our website of similar projects].

Good luck and best wishes from us all here at The Cinderella Project!!

If you need any further information, please feel free to contact us at (604) 603-9155 or e-mail us at info@thecinderellaproject.com