

Tamika Johnson (right), her mother Sandra Thompson (second from right) and high school friend Shamekia Carpenter (left) help Veronica Castillo choose a prom dress at Pat's Gowns. Johnson's The Prom Xperience is outfitting five Waco High senior girls for the prom. Johnson and husband Derrick, a linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs, graduated from Waco High.

Making prom dreams come true

By Jessica Chia / Photos by Rod Aydelotte

Prom looms large on the calendar for high school seniors.

It's a night to celebrate, to dance until the music stops and, of course, to look your best.

This spring, Tamika Johnson, wife of Kansas City Chiefs linebacker and fellow Waco High graduate Derrick Johnson, has been playing the role of fairy godmother. She is granting five seniors from the couple's alma mater a look fit for a ball and an experience meant for a princess.

Tamika, 27, founded The Prom Xperience, a philanthropy that provides deserving girls who cannot afford the costs of attending the event the opportunity to have an unforgettable senior prom.

Tamika and Derrick Johnson were raised in Waco, and graduated from Waco High School before attending Texas State University and the University of Texas, respectively. They have relatives enrolled in Waco ISD schools.

While her husband sponsors the Derrick Johnson Heart of Texas Kickoff Classic for high school football teams each fall at Waco ISD Stadium, Tamika chose to help others in a way that expresses her own interests.

Tamika describes herself as the "ultimate girly girl," although those who know her best say her real charm lies in her unselfish nature.

"She's really kind-hearted, always want-

ing to give back," said her mother, Sondra Thompson, 47, of Waco.

Tamika recalled how she came up with the idea.

"I was going through my senior yearbook and remembering how much fun we had at the prom and I told my husband, 'How awesome would it be if I picked some girls who did well all through high school, but maybe couldn't afford to go to the prom?'" she said. "He said that would be good, and I just took that and ran with it."

Waco High's female students earlier this year were invited to apply to be one of The Prom Xperience's five recipients.

The girls were chosen based on grades, behavior, attendance and a personal essay

in which applicants explained what it would mean to them if they were chosen.

Tamika said the most challenging part was selecting only five girls from all the deserving candidates who applied.

"It was hard to narrow it down to five. I wish I could have chosen at least 10," she said. "For the other girls to find out they weren't selected was the hardest part for me."

Tamika enlisted longtime friend and fellow Waco High alum Shamekia Carpenter, 27, to help her trim from the applications sent in.

Seniors Veronica Castillo, Aerial Jackson, Khadija Lindsey, Jessica Reed and Edith Rodriguez were notified at school before spring break that they were selected for The Prom Xperience.

"They spoke really well (in their essays). They were honest about their stories," Tamika said.

All five girls will be attending prom for the first time. A couple of them said they would not have had the means to go otherwise.

"It was kind of overwhelming," Veronica said. "You never think something like this will happen. We were at a loss for words."

The Prom Xperience provides each girl with a dress, shoes, professional hair styling and makeup application, a pedicure, a manicure, a \$50 Visa gift card, a limousine ride to prom and professional photos prior to the dance.

"I think it's really sweet, because some of us really were questioning going to prom because it's so expensive," Aerial said. "It's a memory for us and for our parents — (now) they don't have to worry."

Edith is vice president of the senior class and has been coordinating aspects of the prom for the past year.

"I was planning all this and I didn't even know what I was going to wear," Edith said.

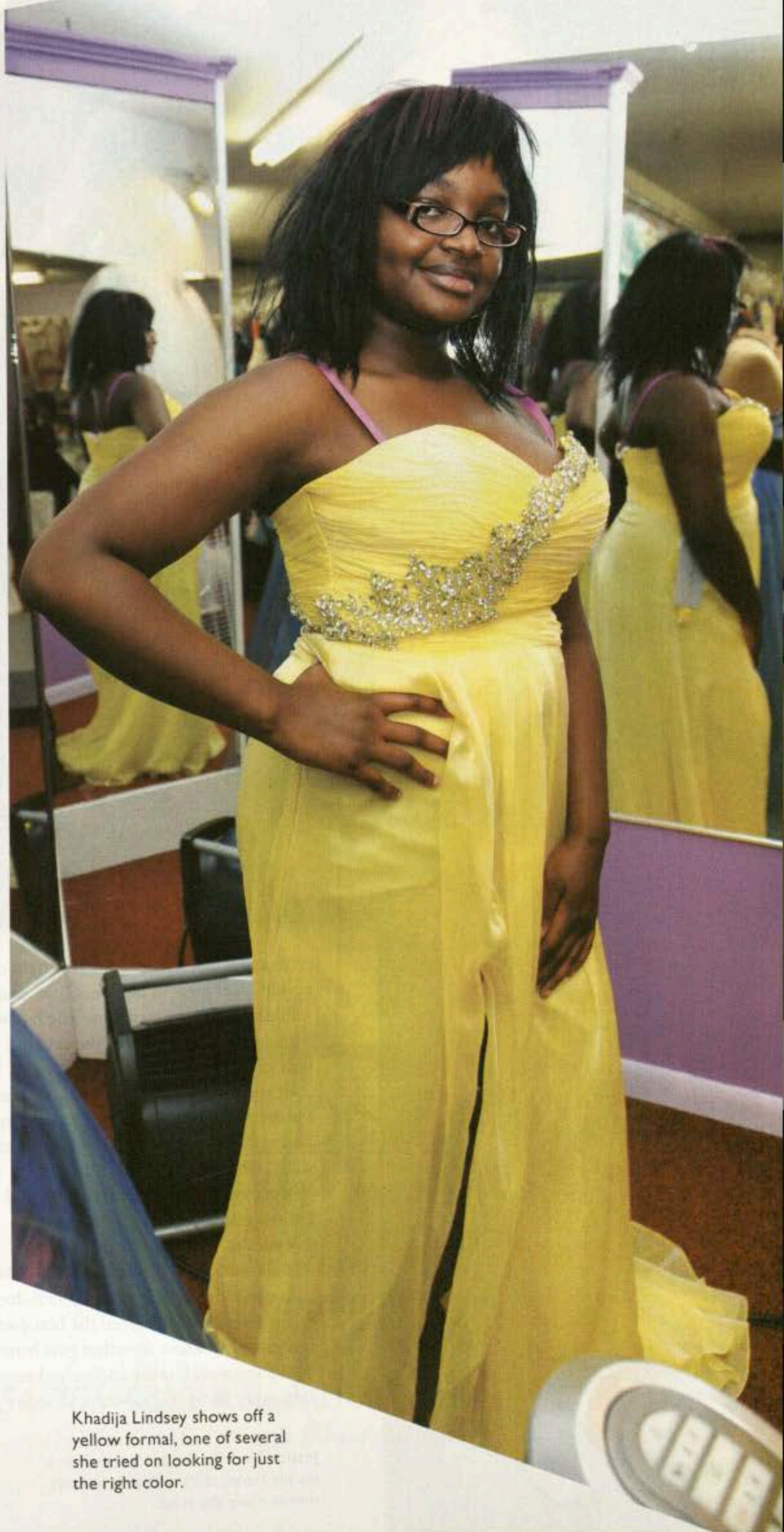
Tamika picked up the girls from school the Monday after classes resumed following spring break, and drove them to Waco formal-wear retailer Pat's Gowns to go dress shopping.

The girls tried on dress after dress, helping each other with complex ties and hard-to-reach zippers and emerging from the dressing rooms to get opinions and to judge for themselves in the store's mirrored wall.

Tamika, Shamekia and Sondra were all present to help the girls make the big decision.

After much deliberation, all five found dresses they loved.

Khadija was happy with her choice, a bright coral floor-length gown.



Khadija Lindsey shows off a yellow formal, one of several she tried on looking for just the right color.

As vice president of Waco High's senior class, Edith Rodriguez had been hard at work planning prom. She said it was tough to choose a dress, but The Prom Xperience was amazing.



"It was tough trying to find the right color, but I feel great in my dress," she said.

Edith chose a printed floor-length gown with a jeweled bodice that she couldn't wait to wear.

"It was hard picking a dress. I feel like the dress should reflect your personality. This really does. It's full of color and very wild," Edith said.

"Today was amazing. I feel lucky and I'm so excited."

Jessica echoed Edith's comment.

"I feel very blessed," Jessica said.

As pleased as they were with their dresses, however, they all agreed the best part was getting to know the other girls better.

"We knew each other and we've known each other for years, but we're all differ-

ent, from different areas of the school," Ariel said.

Tamika, who offered her assistance and guidance during the deluge of dresses, said that she, too, was touched by the afternoon they spent together.

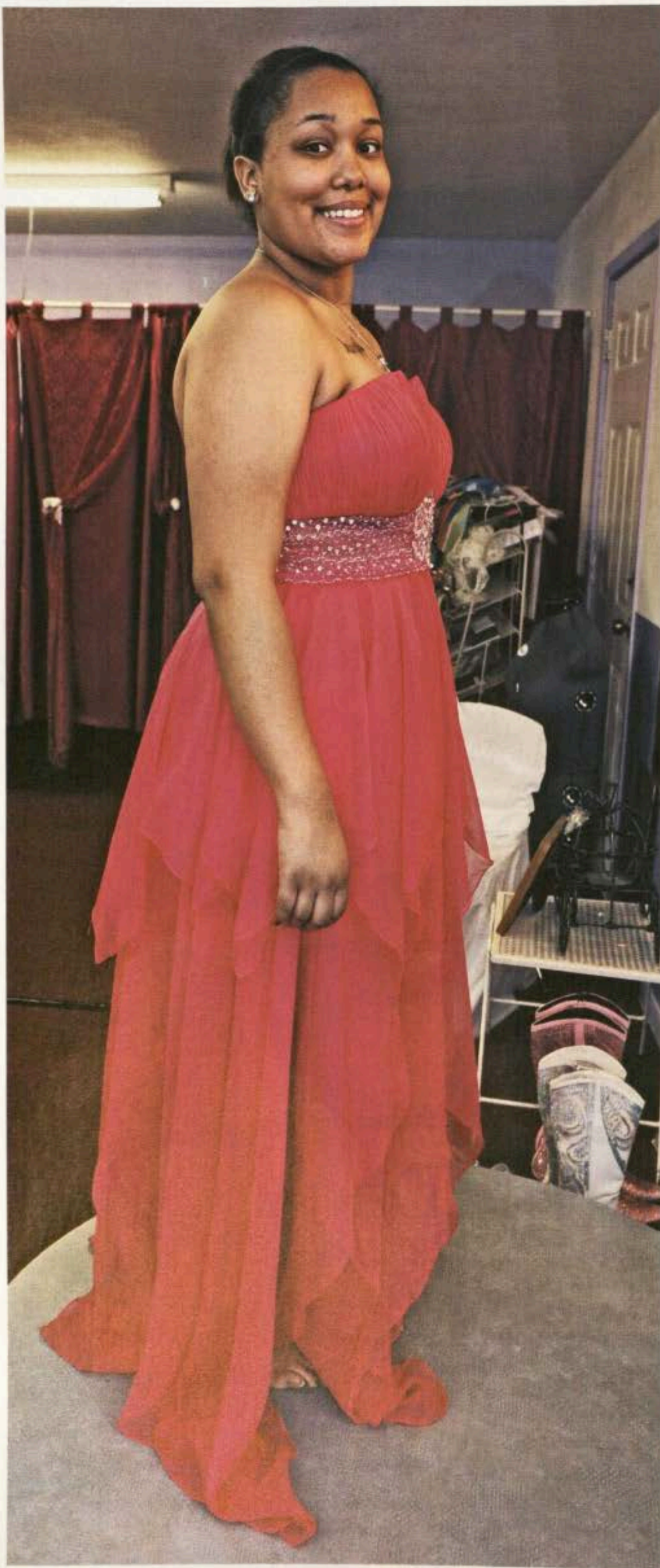
"Seeing how excited the girls were when they were trying on their dresses – some were crying – lets you know that it was all worth it," she said.

"I really want to thank Pat's Gowns," she said. "They gave us a really generous discount and I'm very grateful for that."

Although the prom gown search was a success, the girls' Prom Xperience is far from over.

Tamika is renting a room at the Waco Hilton on the day of the prom for the girls

Jessica Reed (left) is prom-ready in a purple tiered skirt with jeweled top, one of many she tried.



Aerial Jackson said prom will be a special memory for her and her parents thanks to Tamika Johnson's The Prom Xperience.

to get made up, with hair styled and nails polished before they have photographs taken and ride off to prom in a limousine.

Finding volunteers and sponsors to help, Tamika said, was easy, thanks to a willingness to give.

She found two MAC Cosmetics makeup artists who volunteered their services for the day of the prom.

"I got lucky because I have a lot of great friends and was able to get donations easily," she said. "I went to all my close girlfriends that are part of the NFL, wives of players, and my mom helped a lot. She got most of the volunteers."

Sondra, a salon coordinator at Beauty Brands in Waco, was eager to help her daughter's philanthropic effort and to spread the word among those she knows in the beauty industry.

The response was impressive, she said.

Golden Comb Hair owner Stephanie Williams, independent stylist Cheryl Graves and Beauty Brands Salon and Spa stylists Kenosha Okusogu, Deidra Emanuel-Sheppard and Tiffany Scarborough will be styling the girls' hair, while independent nail technician Melissa Knight will provide nail services and Carol Kiphen volunteered her photography skills to capture the results.

"They're just donating their talents and their time. It's such a blessing," Sondra said.

"Marsha Hallmark, a lady who works with me, volunteered to donate the boutonnieres that the girls are going to give the boys and match them to the girls' dresses. I told Tamika, 'God works in mysterious ways.' I'm just glad I could be a part of it."

Shamekia said The Prom Xperience brought her friend Tamika's experiences full circle.

"She wanted to get students who were doing well (in school), but having hard times and couldn't afford their own prom," Shamekia said. "We were in the same position when we were younger, so she thought it was a good way to give back. Prom is a big thing for girls in high school."

Tamika said she hopes to expand the philanthropy in the future, so more students can be recognized through The Prom Xperience for their good decisions, strength, independence and ability to make the best of their situations.

"Eventually, I want to get five to 10 girls from each high school in Waco," she said. "Next year maybe we'll try to help 10 girls from Waco High and just take it from there."

"It means the world to me to be able to give back to where I came from."