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Outside Assignment 2

Lucie Purtic's glitter-covered sneakers sparkled as she danced under the disco ball on the crowded dance floor. The 19-year-old high school senior, wearing a red prom dress and blue eye glitter, had driven five hours from Fort Lauderdale to be here.

This was her night to shine.

Purtic was one of more than 350 guests with special needs and developmental disabilities who were treated like royalty Friday night at Gator Nation's Night to Shine, a prom-style event that celebrates those with special needs.

Lines wrapped around Westside Baptist Church, the home of Gainesville's Night to Shine, as guests waited to walk the red carpet, where they were announced by name while the University of Florida cheerleaders cheered and the UF band played.

"We want to seek after those who may be underseen or overlooked in our community," said Jacob Kling, a 21-year-old UF senior studying applied physiology and kinesiology, who serves as the Night to Shine volunteer director.

The event, part of a nationwide initiative started by the Tim Tebow Foundation, transforms churches across the globe into prom venues every year. At Westside Baptist, guests received corsages and boutonnieres at the door before choosing from an array of activities, including limousine rides, salon services, shoe shining, karaoke, a "Star Wars" room and a meet and greet with UF mascots Albert and Alberta.

“We should all be a part of something that’s bigger than ourselves,” Kling said. “This is a great way for our community to wrap around those people and just care for them and show them how special they are in a way they may not always be treated.”

For Lucie Purtic, dancing was her favorite part. “It’s the best night ever,” she said.

She also enjoyed getting her nails and makeup done and singing karaoke to “Baby” by Justin Bieber, surrounded by volunteers who cheered her on and sang along. At the end of the night, her older sister, Zoe Purtic, crowned her as a queen.

Zoe Purtic, a 20-year-old UF junior studying health education and behavior, volunteered as Lucie’s buddy, a one-on-one companion, for the night. She said watching her sister in the karaoke spotlight was her favorite moment.

“When I came to college, I realized the world is not set up for people with special needs and disabilities,” Purtic said. “If people don’t have someone in their life with special needs, they often don’t see the need to celebrate or accommodate them.”

But Night to Shine, she said, goes above and beyond in serving those with disabilities. “They don’t do the minimum. They do the maximum,” Purtic said.

Volunteers were stationed in every room to encourage guests. Service dogs were available for guests to pet and play with. Photographers acted as paparazzi as guests walked down the red carpet. Everything was free for attendees.

"Night to Shine accommodates every single person,” Purtic said. “They think about every single specific and intricate detail, not even to put those with special needs on an equal playing field, but to lift them up and put them on a pedestal for the night."

Kling, who first volunteered as a buddy before taking on a leadership role, said planning begins 10 months prior to the event. His job is to coordinate vendors, fundraising and guest registration.

With Night to Shine's growing popularity, Kling said the biggest challenge is having to turn guests away due to quickly hitting capacity. "It's so tough to tell people that they need to go to other locations," he said. "We're confined by space at this point."

Kling hopes to one day host Night to Shine at the O'Connell Center to accommodate more guests like Lucie Purtic.

Until then, lines will continue to wrap around Westside Baptist every February as guests wait for their night to shine.