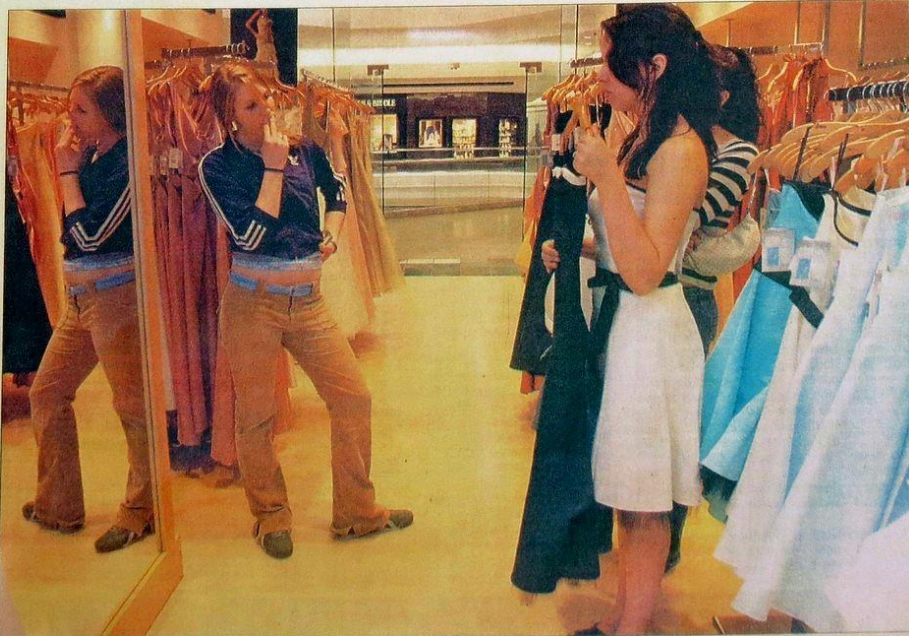




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As prom night approaches It's all about the dress for five Northampton High seniors

By **SUZANNE WILSON** Staff Writer
Photos By **CAROL LOLLIS**



Lea Chiara, left, and Mariah Swanson, two of the five Northampton teenagers who went shopping for prom dresses recently in Connecticut, consider a possibility at one shop in the Westfarms mall in Farmington.

FIVE strong, they pile into Mariah Swanson's silver Civic — a cluster of jeans, backpacks, shoulder bags, jackets, loose hair and ponytails.

Their destination is the Westfarms mall in Farmington, Conn. Their mission: to shop for prom dresses. Their budget: around \$200 each. And falling in love with something more expensive, as one of the girls remarks, would be "really sad."

Riding shotgun is Sonya Fieret. In the back as the car rolls down Interstate 91 past Springfield are Caroline Bloom, Leah Katz and Lea Chiara. All are seniors at Northampton High School.

Mariah and Leah will be looking in earnest. Sonya, who describes herself as indecisive, isn't expecting to find anything. Caroline has already found something at Faces in Northampton, and Lea, who favors vintage clothes, has bought a dress at Uncle Margaret, a downtown Northampton secondhand store.

The five have hung out together before and no doubt will again as senior year winds down, with graduation and goodbyes. Next year they'll be scattered, off to college.

But this fine moment is all about the dress.

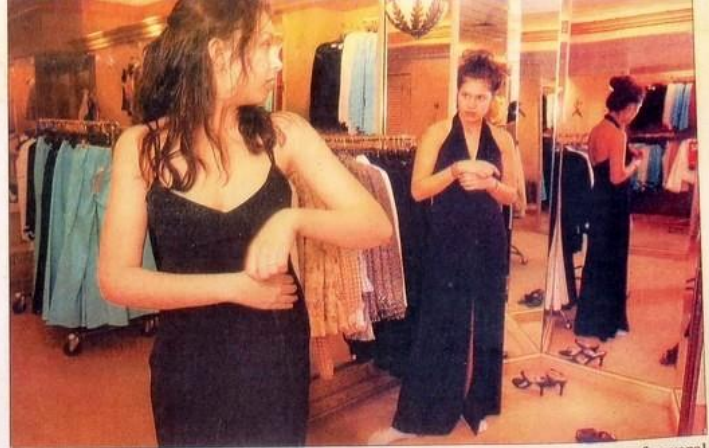
NOT QUITE THE ONE

Entering the sprawling mall at Filene's, they sweep past the brightly lit makeup counters. Just for a second, a couple of the girls slow their pace to admire the pinks and plums and golds of the eye shadows,

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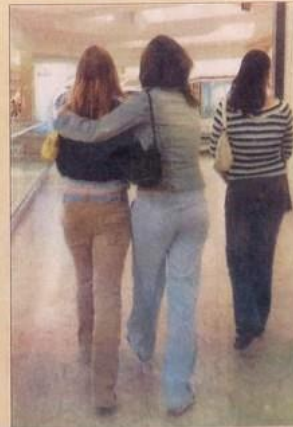
Swanson, left, has found something she likes. She shares her elation with Leah Katz.



Swanson, left, and Sonya Fierst check out two dresses they found at Cache, one of several stores on their shopping circuit at the mall.



Lea Chiara, left, with help from Swanson, ponders buying a dress she loves, even though she has another dress at home she thought she'd wear. Torn about what to do, she leaves the mall as Sonya Fierst offers some comfort.



lipsticks and blushes.

The first stop is Cache, where crowded racks of dressy dresses and gowns fill the back of the store. As piped-in music provides background bounce, the shoppers size up each confection on its hanger.

Mariah soon disappears into a dressing room with several contenders draped over her arms. Most are black, her favorite color. "That is gorgeous," Sonya says approvingly, as Mariah emerges in a flowy gown with a halter top.

But Mariah's not sure. "I don't know," she says, scrutinizing herself this way and that in the three-way mirror. "I do like the cut in front."

Next, she tries on a just-below-the-knee-length black dress. She knows the reaction before anyone speaks up. "You guys aren't crazy about this one, are you?"

Sonya confirms it. "You could do better."

A ROVING EYE

Lea is watching, slightly removed from the hunt. Malls aren't really the places where she finds her best stuff.

"I vintage shop a lot," she says. The strapless black taffeta dress she found at Uncle Margaret's was a steal at just \$40, and has a retro, 1950s look to it that she likes.

So she's all set, she says. "Unless I find something I like more."

Caroline, who hopes to become an actor someday has slipped on an orange gown that blends into darker shades at the bottom.

The try-on is mostly to indulge her love of orange, since she has already bought a

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