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Giving the Glam

JANET MENDELSON **writer**



as a child in Rio de Janeiro, Maristela Rapo knew first-hand what it means to grow up poor. In a *favela*, a neighborhood dominated by crime, she and her four sisters were raised by a single mother, a housecleaner, who sometimes was too ill to work. Her father wasn't often in her life. Gangs fought outside their door. At times, the sisters, one of whom has special needs, were cared for by their grandparents who couldn't afford to support the 15 to 20 grandchildren they helped raise.

Maristela Rapo

But the values her mother taught her about self-respect and working hard to achieve your goals now empowers the Dover resident to help disadvantaged youth. Giving the Glam, a non-profit program founded in 2014 by Rapo and her daughter, Alexis, to date has enabled more than 700 Massachusetts students to attend their senior prom in style and with dignity. From new designer gowns and tuxedos to hairstyling and limo service, Giving the Glam provides everything at no cost to the students.

good works “when you give a gift, you don’t take it back”

For many, the experience feels magical. Their households struggle financially and have multiple challenges; a few are homeless. Going to prom seems impossibly expensive and complicated—until Giving the Glam steps up to help.

But this is about more than one glamorous event.

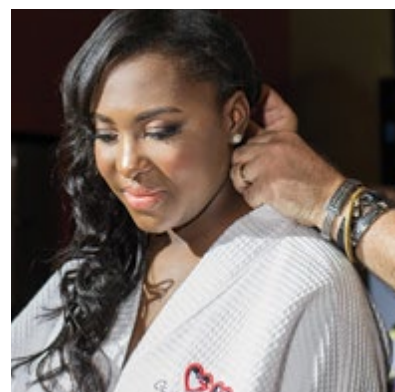
Having been there herself, Rapo understands what their lives are like. Participants can see her and other volunteers as role models achieving their dreams.

“On the day of the prom, getting ready in my Norwood showroom, some have pulled me aside and said, ‘I don’t know if you realize what you have done for me,’” said Rapo. “Parents tell me this, too. Sometimes

it gives the student power to finish high school because they want to go to the prom.

“As an immigrant, I believe it is my duty to give back to a country that has done so much for people like me,” shared Rapo. “My family comes first, but after that is Giving the Glam.”

From January to June, she devotes as much as 60 hours a week to the project. In New York City, she buys gowns from Jovani Designs. She buys tuxedos, shoes, and accessories, and arranges for hairstylists and barbers, makeup artists, manicurists, photographers, videographers, and limos for their big day. In her showroom, they select clothes for the look they want. Volunteers help but she hires a seamstress and profes-



top left: Prom Students from Boston International High School; **bottom left:** Prom day preparations team for Framingham High School and Codman Academy students; **top right:** Prom day hair styling; **bottom right:** The red carpet was rolled out for Framingham High School and Codman Academy students

PHOTOS BY CHRIS ADUAMA-PHOTOPLAY (TOP LEFT, BOTTOM LEFT & RIGHT)

sional stylists for prom days to ensure there are no last-minute glitches.

“My mom said we can’t do anything about being poor. But it is important to always dress clean, speak proper Portuguese, and have good manners because then people will treat you with respect,” said Rapo. “I grew up with second-hand clothes from the church and I appreciated that from the bottom of my heart. But I know how it feels to get something new, something just for you. And I was taught when you give a gift, you don’t take it back. So, these kids get new clothes and get to keep them.”

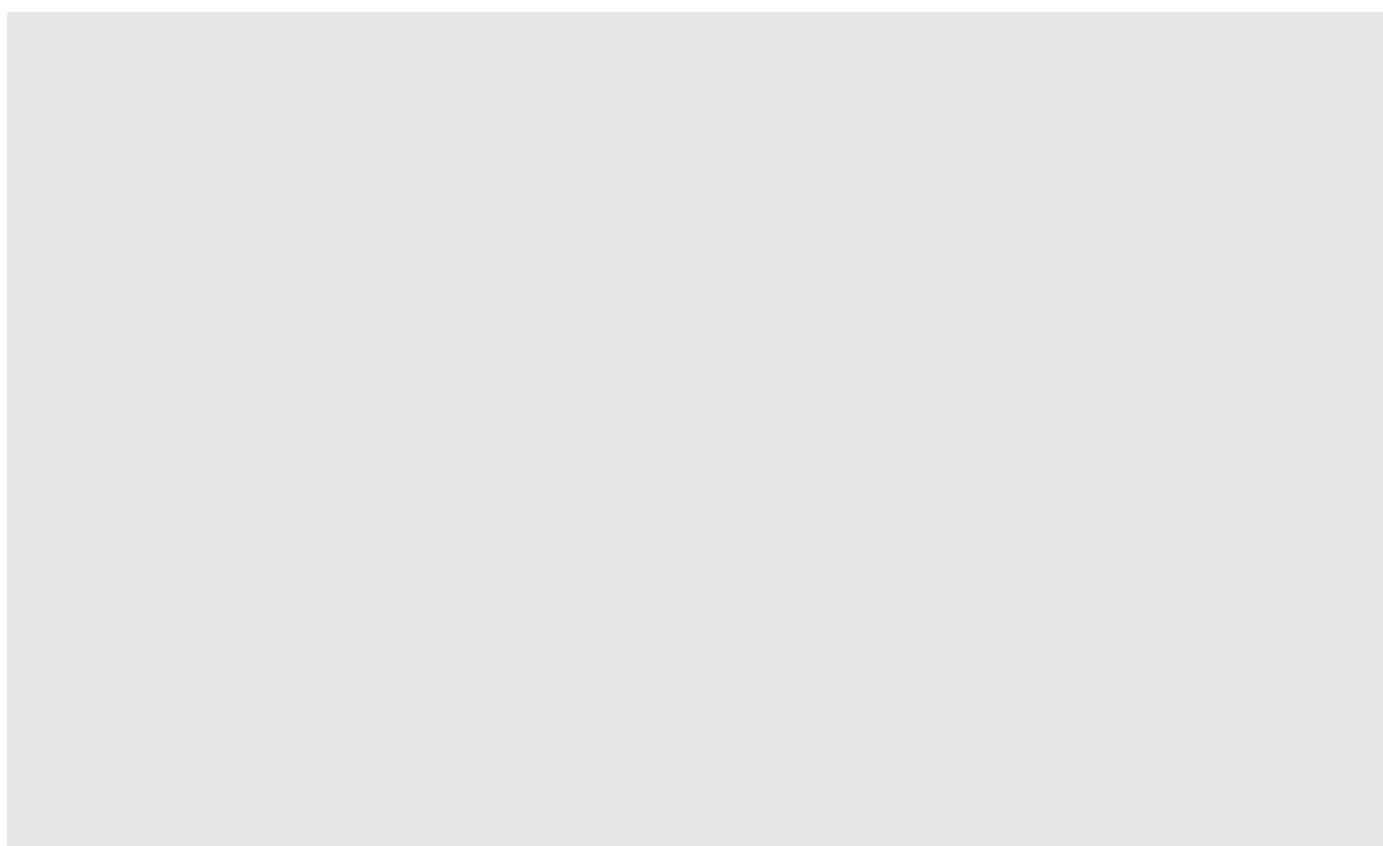
Boston Police Officer Cynthia Brewington, a former METCO student in Wellesley, Weston, and Cambridge, has been an enthusiastic member of the Glam team since 2016. As a Boston Police B-3 community service officer, she worked closely with METCO coordinators and school guidance counselors who identify students for participation in Giving the Glam. Named BPD’s Critical Incident Stress Management

Team Coordinator two years ago, Officer Brewington still insists on working with Rapo’s program. “It’s too important to the job of community policing and to me,” she said.

“I can’t tell you how big Maristela’s heart is, how much she gives of herself to others. I’ve seen participants’ self-esteem blossom. Not all of them feel good about their body shape or hair, but by the time Maristela is done, they look and feel amazing. Each of them feels on top of the world.”

Maristela Rapo left Brazil at 18. She has owned two successful high-end fashion boutiques in Boston and one on Long Island, New York. At 49, she now lives in a beautiful home with her husband, John Rapo, and their children: Alexis, a junior at Boston University in pre-law; twin 16-year-old sons; and a nephew she adopted who lives in New York.

Giving the Glam began in 2014 when Alexis, then a student at Dover-Sherborn High School, introduced her mother to Monique Marshall,



good works “a typical prom costs a student more than \$1,000”

the school’s METCO coordinator. Rapo offered to help, mentioning her fashion expertise. That year, she bought a prom dress and accessories for one girl. The next year, she helped 20, and in 2019 alone, 157 teens from multiple schools.

To date, participants have attended 93 schools including Canton High School, Framingham High School, Boston Arts Academy, the Cardinal Cushing Centers for students with special needs and Boston International High School, which serves English language learners.

Christiana Brown, a 2018 graduate of TechBoston Academy in Dorchester, remembers every detail of getting ready for prom, dancing with Mrs. Rapo at the showroom, having her hair and make-up done. Immediately after, Brown volunteered to do their social media, mentor younger girls, and more. Having graduated from Suffolk University, she’s now a project coordinator for a Boston advertising firm and still a Glam volunteer. Brown credits the program with teaching her networking and presentation skills that are essential for her career.

“During high school there are so many distractions, so much pressure, and we also had the pandemic,” said Brown. “I want people to know that a lot of these students work so hard and go through so much with their families. They deserve this. Giving the Glam helps you figure out who

you are, what you want out of life, and how to come out of your shell.”

According to Rapo, a typical prom costs a student more than \$1,000 out of pocket. At first, she paid all of Giving the Glam’s expenses herself. In 2017, the organization was approved as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Maristela and her husband John Rapo host an annual fundraising dinner at their home. Program sponsors include Subaru of New England; Ernie Boch, Jr.; Excelled Care; and other local businesses and contributors large and small.

“Fundraising is the hardest part of this,” said Rapo. “I’m grateful for the people who believe in us.”

Wellesley resident Raquel Fauza was already following Giving the Glam on social media when she met Rapo at a party in December 2021. A fellow Brazilian, she immediately volunteered to ask area businesses to donate services and clothing. One of the first to agree was Matt Traiger, owner of Jesamondo Salon & Spa in Natick. Fauza not only introduced Wellesley residents Sue Brady and Melissa Dailey to the program, she and her daughter, Olivia, 14, also volunteer at the showroom.

Before Giving the Glam existed, the Boston Police B-3 community service office each year paid for one male and one female student to attend prom and provided lighted escort to the event, said Brewington. METCO’s Marshall at Dover-Sherborn introduced that program to Giving the Glam, creating a partnership.

School guidance counselors select the students from applicants who write essays about their aspirations and college plans. Rapo is not involved in the decision, but said the guidance counselors look for kids who have financial challenges and at what's happening in their home.

Individuals with special needs are a priority for Rapo. She has created glamorous celebrations personalized for young adults who have cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, or are on the autism spectrum. Three parties were celebrated the year COVID cancelled proms.

Brewington drives participants to fittings and prom opens doors for young people to feel comfortable with the police.

"Some of these kids have never stepped out of their own pocket neighborhood before. It gives us the ability to connect, to learn where they're coming from and how we can serve them," she said. "Maristela is strict; rules are rules. They can't skip appointments for fittings. When one girl did, I came to find out she was homeless, sleeping on a different friend's couch each night. Maristela gave her a second chance and BPD was able to offer her family assistance, shelter, and food stamps."

Rapo's dream is for Giving the Glam to expand to small towns and cities across the country. Last year, the program aided 150 students among whom were 40 from a rough high school in Bronx, New York. 

TO LEARN MORE, please visit www.givingtheglam.org