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## Reclaiming Lost Moments

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**DANCING THE NIGHT AWAY:** From ordering a corsage and boutonniere to sharing that special dance, Elizabeth Tondreau '24 and her date were all smiles at the Second Chance Prom.

# Reclaiming lost moments

## Linfield's Second Chance Prom was a dance and so much more

By Jill B. King '98

A line of students waited outside the entrance to downtown McMinnville's Grand Ballroom eager for the night's festivities to begin. They were dressed to the nines, wearing a kaleidoscope of formal gowns and suits, corsages and boutonnieres.

Once inside, several girls slipped on the extra pair of flats previously hidden inside their purses, while others raced to the dance floor donning tennis shoes with their formal attire. Portland's DJ Avalanche filled the room with a collection of his original music, along with the occasional break to play "throw-backs" like Usher's "Yeah" and Flo Rida's "Low."

A balloon arch with sparkling lights rose on one side of the room reminiscent of a backdrop in traditional high school prom pictures. On the opposite side was a photo booth, where groups of friends and dates struck playful poses to create a souvenir photo strip of memories.

This might sound like a scene from a '90s romantic comedy, where a protagonist returns to high school for an opportunity to do things differently. It's similar, in a sense; but the script of this storyline is real. And it's been two years in the making.

Linfield's Second Chance Prom, held in April 2022, was an opportunity for first- and second-year students to dress up, dance and break out prom outfits. It was a chance for them to enjoy the junior and senior proms they never attended in high school thanks to pandemic restrictions.

In fact, Linfield's first- and second-year students missed out on many rites of passage thanks to shutdowns, distance learning and indoor gathering restrictions.

"Just because two years have passed doesn't make it any less significant that we missed our proms and graduations," said Preslie Petrick '24, president of Linfield's Residence Hall Association and a Second Chance Prom planning committee member. "At the end of the day, it is *just* a prom ... but a lot of students kind of just got thrown into college. We didn't get any closure with those traditional end-of-year high school experiences."

## Grieving what was lost

These students have also experienced a less-than-traditional transition to college. The pandemic and ever-evolving COVID-19 protocols all but shut down in-person activities outside the classroom for an extended period of time. There's no precedent for this type of widespread isolation and the long-term effect remains to be understood, but college personnel are already noting a difference on campus.



“Students who graduated from high school between 2020 and 2022 are timid to approach in-person activities because so much of their college life to date has been virtual,” said Keri Knight, Linfield’s director of student activities.

The most recent “Stress in America” survey (conducted annually by the American Psychological Association) found that half of the student-age population feels anxious about returning to social gatherings. As COVID-19 restrictions begin to lessen and things reopen, in other words, people experience varying levels of anxiety.

What people are collectively experiencing, experts say, is unresolved grief.

Grief is the emotional experience a person feels because of a loss – whether it’s the death of a loved one or a living loss, such as surviving a natural disaster or moving through a global pandemic. A societal tendency to avoid grief exists, hoping it might dissipate on its own.

“When losses are difficult to identify and quantify, it may be hard to recognize that we are experiencing grief or loss,” said Sarah Anderson-Wilk, a counselor in Linfield’s Student Health, Wellness and Counseling Center. “It is very important to try to tune in to our emotional and physical needs during periods of loss or grief and to do the best we can to attend to them for our overall health and well-being.”

Embracing the process of grief can move someone to a place where it doesn’t feel so overwhelming – and on the other side is healing, learning to adapt and the return of hope.

“There’s no one way to move through grief,” Anderson-Wilk said. “Although there are shared experiences with grief, it’s unique for everyone. People can experience many different emotions with varying levels of intensity. Acknowledging our grief and losses and seeking support and connection can help us cope with and tend to our grief.”

## Finding healing through connections ... and dancing

“Studies show that the quality of our relationships predicts our future health, happiness and even longevity, so it’s worth it to push ourselves a little to get the interaction we all need,” said Ellen Hendriksen, a clinical psychologist at Boston University’s Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders.

Efforts at Linfield are helping rebuild the campus communities by creating meaningful ways to make important social connections.

“Connection and support are extremely important to moving through and tending to grief,” Anderson-Wilk said. “We each must assess our own risk and risk-tolerance as COVID-19 restrictions lessen, even as the virus continues to be present. At the same time, it is also important to intentionally try to connect socially and build and take care of our relationships. The importance of social connection and involvement has been absolutely highlighted by the pandemic.”

Tickets to Linfield’s Second Chance Prom not only granted admission to the dance, but also doubled as discount dining vouchers at restaurants throughout downtown McMinnville. CatCab, a free shuttle service, was available to chauffeur students to and from campus that night. In all, more than 200 tickets were sold.

But at the end of the day, it’s just a dance, right?

In fact, for Knight and other officials in Linfield’s Office of Student Affairs, the Second Chance Prom represented much more. They hoped it was the start of a new chapter – that if students reclaimed this significant moment, they might feel more comfortable approaching future events and gatherings that are such a huge part of embracing life on campus.

“The Second Chance Prom was an opportunity for a reset; a chance to show students we are building our community back up again,” Knight added. “And they’re coming to a lot more things now. Being social is becoming more of the norm.”

As Knight stood on top of a chair in the Grand Ballroom and filmed the dance floor with her iPhone, she said she realized, “This ... this is what has been missing. I can see so much joy on students’ faces and can feel the healing happening here tonight.”



AN UNTRADITIONALLY TRADITIONAL PROM: They came as dates, friends and unattached groups. Overall, more than 200 people came to recreate their missed prom experience in April 2022.