

GOD'S LOVE SHINING

CC GLOUCESTER COUNTY, NJ, HOSTS JOYOUS 'NIGHT TO SHINE' FOR SPECIAL-NEEDS GUESTS & FAMILIES

Story by Margot Bass



Left: With 120 special-needs teens and adults, the dance floor was never empty at Night to Shine, hosted at CC Gloucester County, NJ. Many had help with their dresses, hair, and makeup from volunteers.

Photo by Mike Ambrico

Top right: Alethea Clark shares her excitement with her parents, Pastor Gary and Valerie Clark of CC Gloucester County, at Night to Shine.

Photo by Micah Martin

Bottom right: Photographers and news crews document the arrival of friends Briar Brown (left) and Matt Rose on the red carpet.

Photo by Rosa DeOliveira

Paparazzi and fans three lines deep waited expectantly for “the stars” to come down a red carpet lined with balloons and flashing camera lights. Adorned in tuxedos and prom dresses, they finally arrived in limousines with a police escort. The crowd welcomed each star, or guest, with enthusiastic cheers and high fives.



The celebrities on this highly anticipated evening were 120 special needs teens and adults between 14-60 years old. The red carpet led to the sanctuary of Calvary Chapel Gloucester County, NJ, which had been transformed into a ballroom. Called a Night to Shine (NTS), it was one of 537 similar worldwide proms sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation and held simultaneously on February 9th. More than 300 volunteers from CC Gloucester County participated in

the event—almost half the congregation. “There was a tangible energy in this place, and I think everyone felt that God was at work, the hands and feet of Jesus,” said volunteer Robin Shelburne. Three other Calvary Chapels held similar balls—CC Eastside, WA; CC Staten Island, NY; and CC Melbourne, FL.

The royal treatment began several hours earlier as lady guests

arrived to don their donated dresses and sit for free makeovers and hairdressing. The gentlemen were treated to tuxedos and haircuts. All guests then met their assigned volunteer buddy for the evening. Later, every guest was crowned as a prom king or queen so that each “would understand that the God of the universe loves them and has a purpose and plan for them,” affirmed Valerie Clark, wife of CC Gloucester County Pastor Gary Clark.



Cosmetologist Monica Burton recruited other peers to serve. “I’ve been doing prom hair and makeup for over 20 years. But there’s nothing like seeing the love and joy in these girls’ lives. They just want to feel beautiful, special. It makes me excited that we can bring that to them,” she said.

So David said to him, [Mephibosheth, who was lame], “Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness ... and you shall eat bread at my table continually.”
2 SAMUEL 9:7

One guest was Zach, a non-verbal, wheelchair-bound young man with cerebral palsy. He was unable to speak and had limited mobility. Valerie related, “I told him, ‘Hey, you and I have a dance tonight,’ and he smiled. After they were crowned, I was on the dance floor holding his hand, and he had this big smile on his face. I could see he was being ministered to and having a great time.”

Some guests were part of Capernaum, a local Young Life program which shares the Gospel and forms relationships with special-needs high school students. “They counted down the days before NTS,” coordinator Robin Shelburne stated. “This whole evening was about affirming them: You were made in the image of God by a God who loves you; you’re not a mistake or an accident.”

While guests danced, performed karaoke, or relaxed in a sensory room, many of their parents or caregivers enjoyed a movie and opportunities for fellowship and prayer in a respite room. Susan Hickman organized the room for ministry. “This woman came to me with her arms wide open, crying. She said, ‘Thank you for blessing my family with this. Just to see the fuss you’re making over my child is so remarkable.’” Volunteers invited them to church and Bible studies.

Pastor Gary, who has a daughter with Down syndrome, met parents in the respite room. “You could tell they felt someone cares, is reaching out and doing something for their kids. And anyone who has children, special needs or not, appreciates that.”

Monica Burton added that some parents, with tears in their eyes, called NTS “the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. They may not go to church or know anything about the Lord, but through this, they can see Christians opening up their hearts to them. And they [heard] about the Lord.”

Justin Barringer volunteered as a buddy. “NTS is a perfect time for people who don’t always get that love and true friendship,” he explained. “I don’t know if the guests and their families were believers. But they were able to trust us with their kids. We tried to show them the love of Christ and make them feel comfortable.”

NTS provided opportunities for Christian volunteers to grow as well. Robin declared, “We talk a lot about being comfortable with the uncomfortable. We saw a little bit of that tonight, but I also saw so much joy on the faces of different members of the church who said they would love these guests the way Jesus has loved them.”

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” MATTHEW 25:40

Gary said that all the volunteers—including caterers, police officers, the city’s mayor, and other community leaders—were “overwhelmed” and excited for next year. “At a men’s event the following morning, the men were tearing up and telling me this was one of the most amazing things they’d ever been a part of,” he said.

“Several NTS buddies have gone to their guests’ basketball games and established relationships outside of church on their own,” Valerie confirmed. “NTS opened doors to welcome families who have felt ostracized from church.”

Parent Kevin Jackson summed up the night: “God said that how you treat ‘the least of these’ is how you treat Me. If you treat people well—those that many don’t think are valuable—then God is pleased. He’s loving this.” 🍀

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Top: Stefan Slowinski (left) and Kristin Campbell hug happily at the Christian event, where celebrity Tim Tebow shared about God’s love via video. Every guest had a buddy for the evening.
Photo by Frank Jones Jr.

Bottom: Brad Hennefer (left) dances amidst laughter and upbeat music in a conga line. Guests ranged in age from 14 to 60 years old. Photo by Mike Hickman

CC Gloucester County, NJ
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