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A Night to Remember The Wellesley Cotillion

Cheryl Fenton writer

Among the Christmas trees and tiny white lights, stands a young lady in a formal gown with a corsage. Her hair is swept up, a few tendrils escaping down her shoulders. A young gentleman in a tuxedo is overheard introducing his date to a receiving line with the utmost properness.

"As they arrive the kids look like movie stars. It's a site to behold," says Wellesley resident Marcia Gorgone.

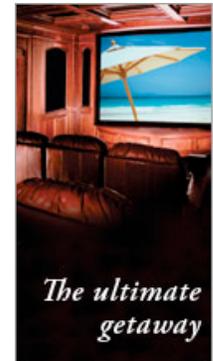
The Wellesley Cotillion. The town's annual version of the Red Carpet. The time when high school juniors and seniors living in Wellesley put down their schedules and homework from their parochial, private, boarding and public schools, and come together for a night where they are the stars.

Gorgone was an attendee of a Cotillion herself in 1967, as well as a former chair for the dance in 1997 and 2004. "It's spectacular. It takes your breath away," she continues. "The illuminated ballroom itself is also gorgeous, with pillars and mirrors and the grand marble staircase leading down."

This brilliant ballroom is within the academic walls of Wellesley College, the traditional location of this revered event. The night is the second Saturday night in December—a time they will never forget.

"It's really exciting," says Andrew, Gorgone's 19-year-old son, a freshman at Providence College who fondly remembers his time at Cotillion 2004. "Right from the start of school, people start talking about it, especially the juniors. In November, most of the seniors start looking for dates. Pretty much everyone in the town is excited."

Emily Chlan, 16, a junior at Wellesley High School, can't wait for her moment to shine, as this year's cotillion on December 10 will be her first.



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"Everyone is excited to come together with the senior grade, get dressed up and have a formal party," she says. "I'm looking forward to having fun with everyone there. I have a lot of friends who go to other schools that are going. We've talked about meeting up beforehand, so that will be fun."

Emily has had more of a chance than others to get excited about Cotillion. Her mom, Stephanie Chlan, is co-chair for the upcoming dance.

"It's not the average dance because it's such a formal thing," explains Chlan.

"It's the first time that any of these kids have experienced something so formal as a cotillion. It's reminiscent of days gone by. In today's generation, a lot of towns don't do anything like this at all."

Co-chairs send out the formal invitations to the Cotillion to all juniors and seniors who live in Wellesley, regardless of the school they attend. The location at Wellesley College can handle up to 500 students, so those who send in their formal response cards before the deadline can expect a wonderful evening.

The Cotillion's festivities begin with attendees going through a formal receiving line of parents and chaperones. The night is full of magic—elegance, music, socializing and catered heavy hors d'oeuvres to fuel the hours of dancing and fun.

Now and Then

The Christmas Cotillion, as it was known then, began in the '40s as a very exclusive dance comprised of the members of a dance class from Wellesley. The public wasn't invited.

"Kids need opportunities to learn how to dance. It's something they are going to be doing the rest of their lives, with upcoming social events, weddings," says Barbara Faubert, a Wellesley resident and mother of six, all of whom have attended the Cotillion. She also has spent time planning and supporting the dance, as past treasurer and chair.

"I think that might be the reasoning behind the beginning of the cotillion," she says. "These people came from the Wellesley dance classes, and this was a way to practice their dancing." The Cotillion emerged in the '50s as two separate dances held for the young adults in town—one dance for college students returning home at Christmas (a tradition that fell by the wayside during the '60s and the Vietnam War) and a second for all juniors and seniors of high school age. The sponsors of the dances were groups of mothers (known as "patronesses") who decided that young people needed a formal type of gathering during the holiday season.

Andrew Gorgone agrees with these Cotillion planners of past—the winter holiday season is the perfect time for such a formal event. "Everything is boring from November to January, so it gives you something to look forward to on one of those weekends," he says of this winter get-together. "And there's usually a lot of snow outside, and that's fun."

But everyone hasn't always been in agreement about issues surrounding this special dance. In 1990, Faubert found herself in the hot seat as chairwoman when she proposed a Cotillion name change—from Christmas Cotillion to Wellesley Cotillion.

"This was during an era when inclusion was important to all of us," she explains. "I think that society in general was trying to be more sensitive to satisfying the needs of people from all faiths."

Faubert remembers it as a "major controversy," but one that had to be addressed.

"I had received some very nice letters from members of faiths that were other than Christian, asking if there was ever a consideration of changing the name from Christmas Cotillion to Wellesley," she remembers. "Those letters were written by townspeople who I had a lot of respect for. I made an executive decision and changed it."

The decision wasn't well received by a few long-time residents who cherished the traditional name, but was eventually embraced by the community as whole.

"Someone asked me, 'Why did you do it?' and I said, 'Because it was the right thing to do,'" explains Faubert.

1990 also found Wellesley saying goodbye to another Cotillion term. "Patronesses," used to describe the sponsors of the dance in the '50s, was changed to "patrons," embracing the assistance and interest of the father figures in the households.

This year's major update to the Cotillion brings a new sound to the dance itself.

"They have had music provided by bands in the past," says Chlan. "This is the first time we're using a deejay. It's something that the kids are really excited about because the deejay will play the music that they really love and they can really get into it so much more so."

Beyond the titles, regulations and music, there have been other more subtle changes throughout the years. These differences are noticed by those who are now watching their children prepare for Cotillion years after they themselves did.

"It's far more elaborate nowadays," says Gorgone, "which I think is a reflection of our society and culture. The designer dresses, the hair, the tanning salons, the Hummer limousines. But the kids think it's fabulous."

"When I went, it wasn't as elaborate," she remembers. "You went out to dinner before, but your mother and father drove you. You didn't have the limo. There was nothing outrageous, because it was a more conservative time. And when the evening was over the evening was over, no after-parties. This year there's more publicity, more excitement because it's a different culture."

Before and After Fun

"I think my favorite thing is seeing some kids who went off to private school in 7th and 8th grade. Then all of a sudden you see them all dressed up three or four years later," says Andrew. "It's

like a high school reunion but you're still in high school." There are plenty of opportunities to capture these special moments. Some parents get together and host pre-cotillion dinner parties and after-dance parties. Once everyone is dressed up and dapper, it's off in the limo to the host's house. These dinners offer a perfect chance to take photos, meet each other's parents and dates, and enjoy a meal before the festivities begin. Afterwards, the students have places to go and reminisce about the night's events.

"The thing we look forward to is taking pictures and having a party beforehand, and then a little party afterwards to unwind," says Emily.

"Pre-parties and after-parties are a big part of it, but not everyone has them," says Chlan. "They aren't part and parcel of going to the Cotillion, but some families get into those and make them really special."



SUZANNE HANSMIRE



But things never get too out of hand. There is always an elegance to the evening.

"As for doing outrageous crazy things, kids are very respectful of the formality and they stay within the bounds of that evening," says Chlan. "They make such a point of looking so nice, it's the excitement of the evening and they respect it. This is one of the reasons I think that it has continued for years."

And there are strict rules to respect as well...zero

tolerance for drugs or alcohol, no smoking and leave the backpacks at home.

"With the first letter [to the parents], we send out policies," she says. "Then we have newsletters, so they are continually reminded that the epitome of perfect behavior is expected of [the students]. Be ladies and gentlemen."

"I'm thrilled to report that the kids were a real joy," says Gorgone of the years that she chaired the dance. "They were well mannered, well dressed and refined. They were real young ladies and gentleman. I didn't have one problem with the 500 kids we had there."

"The main thing about this dance is that it's just a beautiful evening. It's Christmastime. It's romantic," she says.

A Support System

The ticket presented at the door by each attendee, a policy that has only been in place since 2004, is actually just a way to track attendance numbers. It's the generosity of the parents that keeps the Cotillion in "business." The \$50 per student is only a suggested and hoped for donation.

"Not everyone donates, although the response and support is great. Some are very generous. It usually goes over the top. We have so much parental support," says Gorgone.

It's also the time spent by the parents in organizing, planning and decorating that is worth its weight in gold. The Cotillion committee is comprised of around 30 or so parents who volunteer their time for the preparation that goes into this formal event. "I think the kids are appreciative of the parents' effort," she continues. "It's a big production for the parents to set up. There's a lot of elaborate planning ahead of time, but then it all falls into place."

Andrew knows firsthand the support and work that the parents put in during the two years his mom chaired the event. "It's tough because not everyone claps for them at the end. In the greeting line you meet everyone who worked on it," he says. "You can shake their hands and thank them. They do get recognized, but I don't think everyone knows how much work the parents put into it."

The Cotillion tradition has also been embraced by the community, as Wellesley goes above and beyond to make sure this night is a magical time for the kids. "We have a magnificent mirrored ball that had been originally put together by Leo MacNeil who ran MacNeil Glass Company, which was headquartered in Wellesley for generations. They had done the mirrored ball 40 or 50 years ago, and it was looking sad," remembers Faubert of her 1990 involvement with the community surrounding the Cotillion.

"There were a number of pieces of mirrored glass missing. I took the ball to MacNeil Glass to Leo's sons. His two sons, who were in their 40s or early 50s at the time, looked at me and got all teary eyed. They said, 'We are going to take care of this ball for you.' They redid the entire thing. I went to pick it up with checkbook in hand, but they just handed it to me and said, 'It was our pleasure to do it.'"

And let's not forget the continual support by Wellesley College, the location of the Cotillion every year since its inception with the exception of 2003. That year, the event was held at Babson College's Knight Auditorium due to construction surrounding Alumnae Hall at Wellesley College.

"Wellesley College is great and they should be recognized," says Gorgone. "They store the decorations, provide the support staff to pick them up, deliver them and take them down, and clean. They have been just amazing."

The Future of the Cotillion

Spanning over 60 years of annual Cotillions, some might think that this tradition would become outdated. But that is nowhere near the case.

"The thrill then and now is feeling grown up and getting dressed up," says Gorgone. "That hasn't changed and never will."

"I think [Wellesley Cotillion] has survived because the parents want to cling to that memory of when they went," says Faubert. "They want their own children, no matter the generation or the decade, to have some fun social event to go to that is just a townwide

event. It has survived because the parents want it to survive.”

As the longtime owner of a Wellesley childcare center, Faubert believes she is in the presence of the next generation of young ladies and gentleman—those who will be gracing that grand marble staircase of a Cotillion of the future.

“Change is inevitable,” she says, “but the tradition of the Cotillion is fortunately something that we in town who are parents think is important enough to keep going.”

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