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Second prom as good as first

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Dareld Keil felt "almost" like a high school senior again Sunday the moment he hit the dance floor at what he called his "second senior prom."



Judy Ring takes a spin on the dance floor Sunday with 93-year-old Evelyn Oleneski at the "Merrymakers Senior Prom" at the DC Centre. Merrymakers is an organization that provides social events for senior citizens.

"This is a lot of fun," the 78-year-old north Omaha resident said, mopping his forehead with a crisp white handkerchief. "About the only thing that changed is I would've been spiking the punch back then."

Keil was among about 200 senior citizens and 60 volunteers dancing and reminiscing at the first "Merrymakers Senior Prom" at the DC Centre near 120th and West Maple Road.

Merrymakers, a nonprofit organization that offers social opportunities for senior citizens, sponsored the free event from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

The Merrymakers dance band, led by Johnny Ray Gomez, supplied vintage music. The opening number, "Cab Driver," popularized by the Mills Brothers in 1947, got people out of their seats immediately.

Jessica Prater, 20, was cutting a rug with Keil for several songs before the pair stopped to rest. Prater was one of 30 young people from the Bellevue Christian Center who volunteered to help out at the event.

Dressed in a full-length blue prom gown, Prater said it was her first prom.

"I was home-schooled, so I didn't have a prom," she said. "I didn't even really know how to dance, so I am learning fast. It's been great."

Across the dance floor were Jim and Phyllis Fowler of Council Bluffs, who have been dancing for all 57 years of their marriage. They said they don't plan to stop anytime soon.

The Fowlers received many compliments about their dance floor elegance, but Jim also stood out with his two-tone black-and-white wingtip shoes.

"I've had more compliments on the shoes," Jim Fowler said. "I guess people don't see styles like this too much."

Sitting with the Fowlers were friends and fellow Council Bluffs residents Charlotte Carlson and Jean Burns. The ladies didn't want to reveal their ages but had their young dance partners huffing and puffing.

"I could not keep up with (Carlson) out there," said Upile Bikoko, 23.

Carlson, who did say that she graduated from high school in 1951, said Sunday's prom differed from her high school in one important way: "This prom has been more lively."

The Merrymakers dance band appeared to have a lot to do with that, churning out tune after tune with hardly a break.

Gomez estimated that his own band, the Johnny Ray Gomez Revue, played for 50 to 100 proms across Iowa and Nebraska over the years.

"It's just great to see so many smiling faces and rekindle old memories," Gomez said. "I am surprised by how many people tell me that we played at their schools and towns."

Julie Cerny of Papillion surprised Gomez with a photo of him from her 1961 prom at St. Ludger's High School in Creighton, Neb.

Gomez autographed the pristine picture of him in a tuxedo with his accordion. He was only a teenager himself when he began playing professionally.

Paging through a scrapbook of prom pictures, Julie Cerny said the music of the Merrymakers was "perfect" for dancing with her husband, Gene.

"Everything they play is good," she said. "The temperature in the room seems to be going up, but maybe that's just because so many people are dancing and having such a good time."

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