

Keep Calm & Think Prom

The evolution of prom traditions and their impact on Paly students

Prom: A classic American experience. A night full of dancing and singing. The excitement of getting ready with friends and the anxiety of waiting for a promposal. But how has this age-old tradition evolved throughout the years?

When senior Celia Frahn was presented with the opportunity to attend prom as a freshman, she was overwhelmed with joy and excitement. “It was at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, and finding a dress was super exciting because as a freshman I was like, ‘oh my god, PROM,’” Frahn said.

Despite the anticipation building up to the dance, as a freshman, Frahn recalled feeling oddly out-of-place, as prom is a tradition primarily reserved for high school juniors and seniors. “I felt like at some points of the dance I didn’t feel super comfortable in the dress, [which] made me enjoy it less,” Frahn said.

Frahn’s second prom was as a junior at the Elks Lodge in 2021. After a year of living through a devastating pandemic, Frahn eagerly jumped at the opportunity to attend this ball. After her freshman year dress experience, she noticed a visible

change in her pre-prom mindset.

“My junior year, I wore a dress with a slit up the side which was easy for dancing but also I felt a lot more powerful and comfortable and confident in it,” Frahn said.

The aspect of prom that made the most meaningful impact on her experience was the newfound confidence that came with three years of high school, which made her junior prom much more enjoyable than her freshman prom.

“If you go into [prom] feeling confident about your makeup, hair and what you’re wearing, you’ll have a much better time,” Frahn said.

When picking out what to wear to prom, Frahn finds herself gravitating towards traditionally feminine attire.

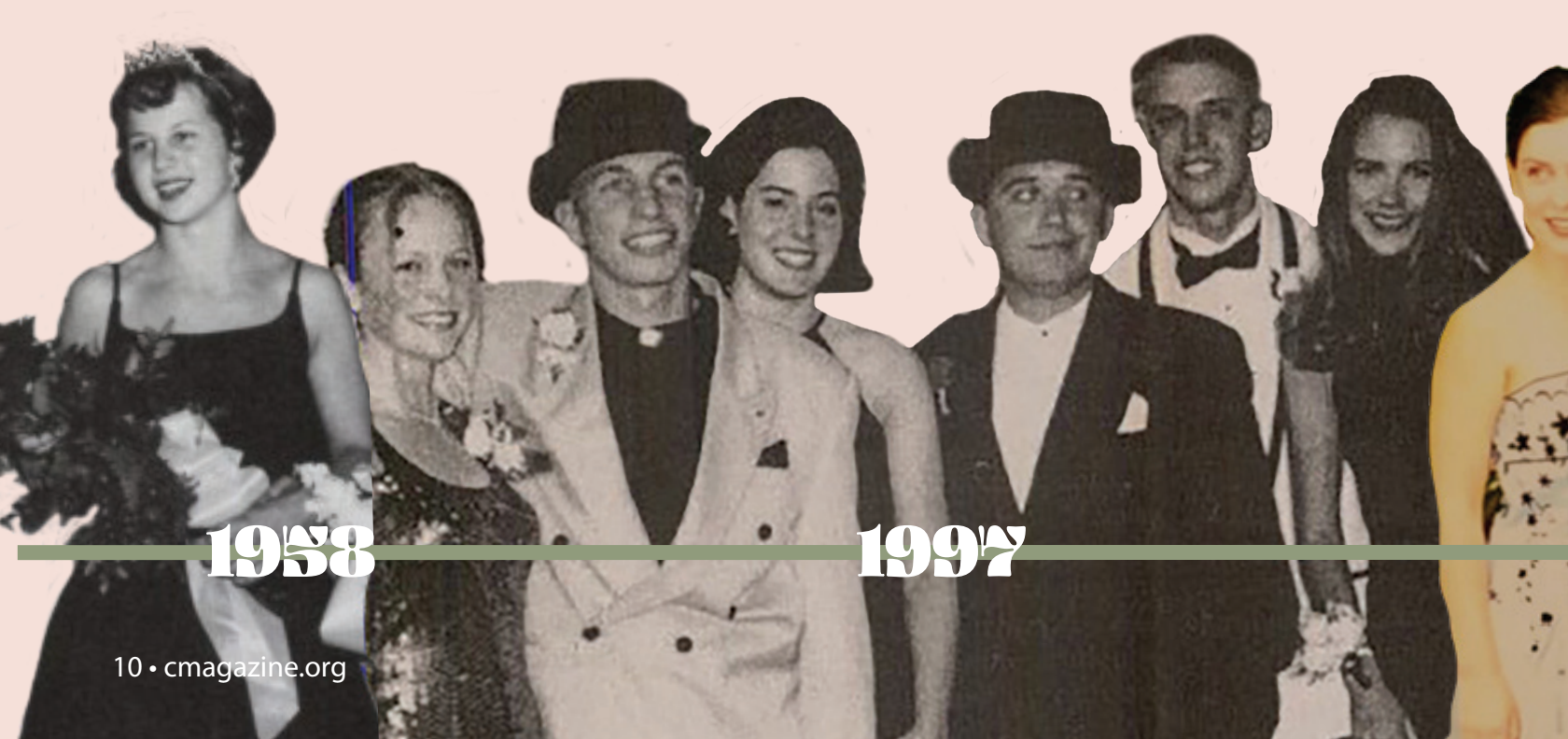
“I’ve just been programmed to think that dresses are what I need to wear,” Frahn said. “And I like dresses. I love them. But I’ve never really thought about other options.”

When Paly librarian Sima Thomas attended her prom, she noticed the evident heteronormativity of the event, as straight cisgender couples were generally the norm.

“I don’t remember if Paly was comfortable enough of an en-

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**CELIA FRAHN
SENIOR**



1958

1997

vironment for a same sex couple to go to prom together,” Thomas said. “Going to prom as a gay or lesbian couple was completely taboo at that time.”

While there is much progress to be made, there has been more acceptance of queer couples and various gender expressions.

“One of the cool things I like about seeing high school over the years and remembering my own experience is that [students] express gender differently and think about identity differently,” Thomas said.

Thomas attended her first prom as a junior at Paly in 1999, and she was able to make the most of her preparation time by choosing beautiful accessories and creating memories with her mom.

“I think my mom had a lot of fun taking me shopping and getting a dress and a little wrap and then getting my hair done,” Thomas said. “I still remember...these little butterfly hair clips I really liked and getting my makeup done.”

Prom was particularly special for Thomas’s mother, who was one of nine children and never got to fully enjoy the prom experience as a teenager. “I think my junior prom experience was more my mom’s experience than my own,” Thomas said. “It was a little over the top—I still have a hand-painted silk shawl with butterflies on it that she got me—but I think she had a lot of fun.”

Apart from these special memories with her mom, prom itself was a bit underwhelming for Thomas, as she had based her expectations off of classic 80s movies including “16 Candles” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” During both her junior and senior year prom, Thomas attended the dance with a group of friends

and stuck with them during the duration of the dance. “Because we took limos [to the venue], we didn’t stay for very long. We kind of ate and maybe danced a bit,” Thomas said.

After attending prom herself and then chaperoning prom for later students, Thomas has witnessed a definite shift in the dance, the attire and the overall attitude towards the occasion. Thomas described the style during her era as ‘grunge and alternative’ with lots of ‘baby doll dresses and chunky shoes.’ Many people opted for a more edgy look than is currently fashionable for prom today.

In addition to fashion, Thomas feels that a stronger sense of community is cultivated due to the new bus transportation system where all students travel together to prom, as opposed to each group using their own transportation, as they did when she went to prom. The connection formed between students is further strengthened during prom night.

For Frahn, her sparkling dress and wonderful friends made her junior prom experience one of the most memorable nights of her life. “I really had a sense that I belonged there more than my last prom experience because I knew a lot more people, and I loved my dress,” Frahn said.

For both Thomas and Frahn, prom was an enjoyable experience, even if it didn’t necessarily live up to expectations perpetuated by the media. Their best advice is to take full advantage of the event and go into the night with the intention of having fun.

As a senior, Frahn is focusing on cherishing her prom experience with friends. “[This year’s prom] is going to be my last,” Frahn said. “I can really go into it with the perception of only having fun and being present in the moment.”

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**SIMA THOMAS
LIBRARIAN**

