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Saturday, May 10, 2008

Look like a million bucks

Live like an A-lister, paparazzi and all - for a price

Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

BELLEVILLE -- Jasmine Donald calls herself an "over-the-top person," so it's fitting she rode to her prom last week in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce Phantom.

Donald, 18, wanted to make a bold statement. And for \$6,000, she did, thanks to a gift from her grandmother.

The Belleville teen stepped from the \$340,000 luxury car into a crowd of paparazzi snapping shots of her walking into the once-in-a-lifetime event.

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At least for a night, Donald led the lifestyle of the rich and famous -- complete with hired photographers.

"It was all about me," she said. "I felt like a star. I like the attention to be on me, especially positive attention."

Even in a poor economy, some people are willing to pay for a glimpse of the glamorous life. To keep up with demand, companies are stepping in to provide regular Joes with private helicopter shuttle service, Lamborghini rentals, personal assistants and chefs.

For many, the lifestyles of celebrities have become the new standard to aspire to, said Michael Bernacchi, a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy.

"It shows people that we are able to ascend to the purchasing level of those in Hollywood, New York and in sports," Bernacchi said. "We're always climbing that ladder with 'me too, I can do this.'"

"Celebrities are those folks we have chosen to emulate. We can't emulate who they are, but we can approximate what they can buy."

And for packages that range from \$3,400 to \$100,000, paparazzi will stalk you for a night or companies will transport you on a six-passenger business jet.

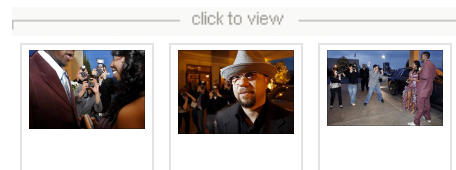
"It was my day and I wanted it to feel special," Donald said of the services from the Lavish Luxury Store for her prom at the Crystal Gardens in Southgate.

Owner Maurice Morris, 39, of Detroit said Lavish Luxury is not for the stars. It's for ordinary folks who want to feel like a star, even if it's just for a night.

"I don't want too many celebrities," said Morris, whose company is the only one known to offer such luxury services in Detroit. Since the company was launched last month, nearly a dozen people have bought packages, Morris said. "I want to make people feel like they are a celebrity themselves. I'm



Jasmine Donald and date Corey Ervin are accosted by the "paparazzi," who were hired by her grandmother for her prom. (Bryan Mitchell / Special to The Detroit News)



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offering to the public (the services) so they can feel like an A-list celebrity."

People from all income ranges spending their hard-earned cash on luxury

items is nothing new.

According to the Unity Marketing's Luxury Report, a study of the U.S. market for luxury goods and expenses, the thirst for high living contributed more than \$321 billion in consumer spending last year. Still, the report, which deals with 22 luxury products and services, said consumers cut spending by 12 percent in 2007.

Meghan McCarthy, a concierge at the Townsend Hotel in Birmingham, said regular folks come in to get the VIP treatment "fairly often."

McCarthy said the hotel has been known to shut down boutiques in Birmingham or West Bloomfield for shopping sprees for their clients. They can do almost anything, including having jewelry flown in from out of town and buying clothes for a guests' night out.

"Our goal is to always say yes; we can pretty much do the impossible," McCarthy said.

With potential clients ranging from business owners to women on girls' nights out and prom and graduation parties, Morris is banking on Detroit's comeback to support his new company.

But his timing isn't great: Detroit leads the nation in foreclosures, and the city's deficit is projected to be more than \$100 million. Detroit also remains one of the nation's poorest cities, with about 31 percent of city residents below the poverty line in 2005, according to the census.

Lisa Vorowski, a manager at Rochester Limousine, said she gets a steady stream of customers seeking to rent her 30-passenger coach. The cost is \$155 per hour plus tips. A night on the town for most people would cost about \$1,100.

"Our business has not gone down because of the economy at all. It's a steady business no matter what the economy is," Vorowski said.

Morris said the thirst for celebrity is strong. There are more than enough venues in Detroit to support his clientele's desire for VIP treatment, including the casinos, major sporting events and even local hot spots, he said.

"With everyone wanting the glamorous life, I feel like people will probably break the bank for their kids," said Sonya Morton, who plans to buy a \$5,000 luxury package for her sister's prom in Detroit.

"They want to feel just as glamorous as those people who have that (lifestyle) day-to-day."

There are even plans to expand Lavish Luxury to other cities, including Miami, Las Vegas and Atlanta. Those areas have companies that offer similar services.

"I believe Detroit is going to take off in the next three or four years," Morris said. "We just wanted to do something here. No one else is doing it."

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