

# People

## Three Teens Get the Prom of Their Dreams at Madison Square Garden

By NATE JONES

04/09/2014 at 04:30 PM EDT



Rowan Zubi (left) Monica Hernandez and Noelle Dadon in their prom dresses  
TIFFANY HAGLER-GEARD FOR PEOPLE.COM

Rowan Zubi couldn't stop twirling.

The 17-year-old, a two-time cancer survivor, was visiting the Manhattan studio of Malaysian designer [Zang Toi](#) to try on her prom dress for the first time. A sunny yellow number with a flowing cut, Zubi's dress brought to mind Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.

By the time Zubi had run the gamut, dizzy but still upright, 17-year-old Monica Hernandez emerged from the dressing room in a bright red floral dress. The now-familiar process of screams, poses and photos began all over again. And it didn't stop until the final girl in attendance, 15-year-old Noelle Dadon, had finished showing off her dramatic black t-shirt-and-skirt ensemble.

All in all, it was a normal prom fitting, similar to millions happening across the country this spring. Except there was a supermodel in attendance, all the dresses were free, and these girls weren't going to any old prom: Zubi, Hernandez and Dadon would be attending an all-expenses-paid charity prom at Madison Square Garden, put on by the [Garden of Dreams Foundation](#).



**Rowan Zubi (left) and Damaris Lewis**  
TIFFANY HAGLER-GEARD FOR PEOPLE.COM

[Garden of Dreams](#) is a nonprofit affiliated with Madison Square Garden that partners with other charities to create memorable experiences for kids who have overcome obstacles. In the case of the organization's first-ever on April 8, that meant taking 52 kids – half from local medical charities, the other half from [Bronx community development organization WHEDco](#) – decking them out in the finest fashions, and transporting them by party bus to the the MSG theater lobby, which had been transformed into an "Enchanted Garden" for the night.

In place of a reception line of vice-principals, the kids got a red carpet with [Michael Strahan](#). In place of the Electric Slide, they rocked out to a [Travie McCoy](#) performance.



**Noelle Dadon (left), Damaris Lewis and Zang Toi**  
TIFFANY HAGLER-GEARD FOR PEOPLE.COM

Also on hand for the prom was model Damaris Lewis, a [Sports Illustrated swimsuit alum](#) and former backup dancer for [Prince](#), as her fairy-godmother alter ego, Marigold. A Garden of Dreams mentor for the past two years, Lewis was at Zang's studio fitting in March to play the role of, in her words, "the embarrassing teacher who doesn't go away."

Once all three girls had gotten into their dresses, Lewis led them through a crash course in runway strutting. She shouted instructions ("Shoulders relaxed! Hand on the hip!") and encouragement ("Work! Pose! Fierce! We love you!") while the girls tried gamely to take her commands to heart. More hip-swaying here, more red-carpet glare there.





**Monica Hernandez**

TIFFANY HAGLER-GEARD FOR PEOPLE.COM

"The thing about these kids is, they're so much bigger than when you meet them and say 'Hi,'" Lewis told PEOPLE. "Everybody has a backstory."

In Zubi's case, it was a long battle with leukemia.

"Rowan was always in the hospital, so she never really got into the school setting," her mother Asma told PEOPLE. The whole teenage experience was new to her. "She didn't have friends – she had to learn how to do all this."

Dadon was diagnosed with Tourette's, glaucoma and arthritis during childhood; doctors told her mother Yvette she might never be able to communicate. "Now," Yvette said, "I can't shut her up."



**Monica Hernandez before the Garden of Dreams Foundation prom**  
REBECCA TAYLOR / MSG PHOTOS

Hernandez hails from the South Bronx; she got into Garden of Dreams through WHEDco, along with most of her school friends. A senior, she hopes to study business in college and then work in the music industry.

"She's a great child, I wish I could give her more," her father Miguel told PEOPLE. "She deserves this, and even more."



**Noelle Dadon before the Garden of Dreams Foundation Prom**  
REBECCA TAYLOR / MSG PHOTOS

Through Garden of Dreams, all three girls now have the chance to explore their talents. Dadon sang one of her favorite Pink songs at Rockefeller Center, and [got to perform the national anthem](#) at a New York Rangers game. Zubi is a dancer; her routine to Chris Brown's "Yeah 3x" earned great reviews at the organization's talent show at the Garden. Hernandez got a jumpstart on her career in the music business by working with MSG's [Fuse Rocks the Classroom](#) program.

In March, though, all these concerns were secondary to their prom plans: Their hair (provided by Bumble and Bumble), their dresses ("pretty") and their dates (other boys from Garden of Dreams, who they met at a bowling party in February).

"I'm looking forward to this dance more than than my school one," Zubi explained. "In that one, I know everyone. At this one, I can introduce myself."

"I don't think I'm a very good dancer," Hernandez said. "But I'll try."

"It's wonderful to see Noelle get these wonderful opportunities," Dadon's mother Yvette told PEOPLE. "This kind of glow lasts a long time."





**Noelle Dadon, Monica Hernandez and Rowan Zubi with their dates at the Garden of Dreams Foundation Prom**

ANGELA CRANFORD / MSG PHOTOS