

## **NEWS ARTICLE: "Separate black, white and Hispanic proms held"**

Originally printed in the May 9, 2004 *Wilmington Star News*

### **Separate black, white and Hispanic proms held**

*Some say they support division*

By Jeffrey Scott, Cox News Service

LYONS, GA. - On Saturday evening at a nightclub near this small South Georgia town, a footnote in history took place to a Latin beat.

Hispanics, many of them the children of migrant workers who originally came to Toombs County to plant and pick the Vidalia onions that make this region famous, held their first prom.

It's the third high school prom in as many weeks in this rural county about 200 miles southeast of Atlanta.

Blacks held their prom at the National Guard Armory in Lyons in mid-April. Whites held theirs at the same location Friday night.

County school officials have tried to put a good face on the division between black and white and Hispanic communities that has prompted students to host separate proms.

"I don't know that it's divisive at all," said Kendall Brantley, superintendent of the Toombs County Board of Education.

"I think it's been portrayed wrong. I had one parent tell me that his child, a white child, is going to all three proms. I think it gives the kids more opportunity."

When the three proms became national news in early April, the attention raised tensions between students and school administrators. Many in the community say the portrayal of racial division has been overstated.

"We've been inconvenienced a lot by this," said the black principal of Toombs County High School, Ralph Hardy.

He has weathered criticism for staying out of the fray because, he said, the school does not officially sanction any of the proms.

"I've had hundreds of calls. It's really been tough."

Last week, a crew from the Hispanic cable network Univision was in town shooting a segment. TV crews from Fox News and NBC planned to cover the prom Saturday night at The Silverado club.

Students have held separate black and white proms for several years, according to school board member Needum Rogers, who said officials didn't try to intervene "because we didn't want to force people to socialize."

He said students at Toombs County High are generally accepting of each other. Of the school's 769 students, 12 percent are Hispanic, 31 percent are black and 56 percent are white.

"This year they have a black beauty queen," said Mr. Rogers.

But Yuri Flores, a junior who organized the Hispanic prom, said she was prompted by an ugly incident in February when one of her friends went to buy a ticket for the school prom and was asked if her date was white, black or Hispanic.

Her friend replied that her date would be Mexican and was told, according to Mr. Flores, "it was a white prom – not a Mexican prom, not a black prom."

Andrea Cruz, executive director of the Southeast Georgia Communities Project Inc., which advises Hispanics on social services, said the prom is a flashpoint that illuminates the division in the community over immigrants who harvest the crops that drive the local economy.

"They need us," she said. "But they don't want us around."

She said that by not pushing to have one all-inclusive prom, school officials are endorsing division. "Principal Hardy is being irresponsible by not doing anything," Ms. Cruz said last week.

---

<http://search.starnewsonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040509/NEWS/405090344&SearchID=73270154072157>