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Daily Pilot

Going, going, gown

■ A Costa Mesa bridal shop gives away wedding dresses to more than 50 women with ties to the armed forces

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Jeff Benson, Daily Pilot

Some stores give out free coupons, free samples and perhaps even a free gift here and there. But free wedding gowns? For 53 lucky ladies, it was

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more than a great white hope.

Hundreds lined up outside Mon Amie Bridal Salon in Costa Mesa Sunday as store volunteers aimed to give away up to 100 wedding gowns retailing upwards of \$2,000 apiece to military fiancées and servicewomen.

"This isn't about the cost of the dresses," said Julie Chalupsky, Mon Amie's director of marketing. "Every girl dreams of a fairy-tale wedding, and a lot of these girls are putting things on hold for the things going on overseas ... We're just giving them the gowns for free, and they get to walk out of here, no strings attached."

Jennifer Ramirez and her friend, Carolina Valls, both 21, were among the first in line and camped out for 18 hours just so they could take their pick from nearly 200 dresses. A Fontana resident, Ramirez is getting married in July to an Army serviceman stationed in Iraq. She said the free dress would greatly help with wedding costs.

"I think it's nice, because most of us have been left to plan our weddings on our own," Ramirez said. "This is a huge help."

Upon entering the store, Ramirez searched for a strapless gown, and Valls said she didn't mind waiting in line so long to help her friend pick out the right one for her.

"You grab one section, and I'll grab the other," Valls suggested, minutes before doors opened.

For other brides-to-be, the gown giveaway elicited a wealth of emotions.

"I think I'm going to cry right now," said Lisa Barragan, 31, as she showed her fiancé's military documentation and filled out the required paperwork. "I'm so nervous that I couldn't even spell 'Marine Corps.' So I just put 'Semper Fi.'"

Barragan, a Dana Point resident who waited in line for 13- 1/2 hours, said she planned to search for "something that feels beautiful" and hoped to surprise Staff Sgt. Jason Velez with it when married in April. Velez proposed to her the week before he was shipped to Iraq.

Because the store was closed to the public for the event, Chalupsky said several Mon Amie bridal consultants and managers volunteered their services for the day.

"Each girl has a vision of what they're looking for," Chalupsky said. "Some want a big gown, some want a small gown, some want seamless, and some want strapless. Our consultants know what they're looking at, and they want to give the girls extra-personal attention to make this a special event."

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