

A gown and a guest shot with Rachael Ray

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MANCHESTER – Samantha Danico has all the qualities Rachael Ray was looking for.

Sam's hard-working, funny, articulate, a real "people person."

Plus, she's a size 2.

Those qualities scored the Trinity High School junior a beautiful prom dress, a trip New York and an appearance on the Rachael Ray Show.

After hearing from "Cosmo Girl" magazine last Friday, Danico flew to New York with her parents and on Tuesday taped her segment which airs tomorrow at 10 a.m. on WBZ-TV.

Yesterday, she took time off from school to relax and reflect on the chaotic excitement of the past few days, all stemming from the desire for a nice, tasteful, but oh-so-expensive, prom dress.

"I work four or five days a week," explained Danico, who puts in shifts at Shaw's Supermarket on South Willow Street. "I wanted to walk into prom and have everybody notice, but it's hard for me keep up with some of the other girls."

She had been looking at dresses online, found one she liked, then saw the price tag: \$400.

"To afford that dress, I'd have to work at Shaw's for a month and a half," she said.

Then she saw an essay contest in "Cosmo Girl."



Rachael Ray, center, talks with Brittany Snow, left, and Samantha Danico during the production of Ray's TV show in New York. The show is scheduled to air tomorrow. (DAVID M. RUSSELL)

Hearst Magazines this month launched DonateMyDress.org, a national campaign to encourage girls to donate special occasion dresses to their peers who can't afford formal gowns.

The Danicos live in a tidy south Manchester neighborhood. They're far from poor, but Sam has to earn her own luxuries.

And that's basically what she wrote in her magazine essay.

Her folks didn't even know she entered the contest, and Sam didn't give it much thought afterward. "I didn't expect to get anything out of it," she said.

Rachael Ray had other ideas.

The exuberant Food Network star with her own daytime talk show heard about the dress campaign and started reading the essays.

Ray knew she had "Hairspray" actress Brittany Snow coming on the show to promote her new movie -- "Prom Night," and wanted to find a match to bring those elements together.

It didn't hurt that Danico's odds of getting picked that Ray's first job was in a grocery store, too.

"Samantha wrote an amazing story about why she's deserving," said Lauren Nowell, publicity manager for the Rachel Ray Show.

"We just thought her story was so heartwarming and amazing, and that she'd be perfect for the show," said Nowell.

Snow brought a simple, shimmering, elegant teal gown she wore a few years ago to her own high school

homecoming dance.

Now it belongs to Danico.

"It's very cute. It's my favorite color and I like it a lot," said Danico.

The stay in New York at a luxury hotel on Park Avenue and the pampering of hair and makeup experts backstage passed in a blur.

Her parents, Scott and Susan, watched from VIP seats as Sam, in the audience's front row, was called up on stage for about 10 minutes of air time.

Workers at the show led Danico to believe she'd be one of several girls called up on stage, and she was shocked to find herself alone chatting with Ray and Snow.

"I was nervous," said Sam. "I didn't know what to say."

The shoot went off without a hitch.

"She was adorable," said Nowell. "She was so excited to be here."

Now the dress hangs in Danico's closet, awaiting its Manchester debut next month.

Trinity's prom is set for May 23 and the prom at Memorial High, where her boyfriend goes to school, steps off the next night.

The now-famous dress, like the girl wearing it, will have to work hard and pull a double shift.

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