

## **PHOTOS: Attendees, businesses have a blast at the bridal show**

By ELYSA BATISTA

Sunday, August 23, 2009

ESTERO — The champagne was flowing and the vanilla cake samples with raspberry filling were flying off the trays at Sunday's Bridal Blast.

More than 1,200 brides, grooms and family members trekked to the bi-annual event at Germain Arena — and all knew that making the day special takes lots of pre-planning.

"We're trying to find ideas that are going to be memorable, but not too over budget," said Cape Coral resident Georgette Ann Webb, 39, who attended the event with her husband-to-be Duane VanDevender, 37.

Webb, whose wedding is slated for Nov. 7, said that with the economy the way it is, the couple was hoping to find just the right mix for their nuptials.

In its 24th incarnation, the event boasted 90 vendors from throughout Southwest Florida offering wedding services for every pocketbook, said Maryann Crooker with Show Publishing, which produced the show for the National Association of Wedding

Professionals.

"We're the largest bridal shows in Southwest Florida," said Crooker, who added that between photographers, florists, linen companies, chocolatiers, as well as reception locations, the show was a one-stop-shop. "A bride can literally plan an entire wedding here."

But in addition to being great for brides, the show was also a boon to local businesses trying to break into the wedding business.

"We're brand new, this is our first time," said Bonita Springs Elks Lodge 2753 banquet manager Barbara Kneer, while manning the Elks booth at the show.

Kneer said the lodge had only learned about the show a couple of weeks ago and quickly decided to join.

"Nobody out there knows that we're around," said Kneer. "It's a great economical place

to have their wedding.”

Meanwhile, event veterans Black Tie Tuxedos and For The Bride put on a bridal ware show for attendees.

“We have a blast, we do it every year,” said Debbie Sallee, who owns Fort Myers-based Black Tie Tuxedos.

Getting that one-on-one face time with future bride and grooms has been key over the last 15 years for the store, Sallee said, adding that brides appreciate it when the grooms are helped in finding the right tux.

“We are the last mom and pop tuxedo shop in town,” she said with a smile.

And even though being an independent boutique can be tough, For The Bride owner Wendy Bennett said that word of mouth advertising, a loyal local customer base and shows like Bridal Blast have helped her store over the years.

“It’s super important,” said Bennett of the show reaching out to area residents. “Word of mouth for 15 years has been the basis of why I’m here.”

As for the models showing off her bridal gowns, Bennett said she didn’t have to search long for them — they’re all former brides who found their gowns at her shop.

In the end, Bonita Springs couple Bianca Perez, 29, and Brandon Drummond, 25, said their trip to Bridal Blast was more of a preemptive strike since their wedding isn’t until October 2010.

“It was nice,” said Perez, after the show. “They had a lot of interesting things there.”

Now with the show done and bags full of pamphlets, it’s time to get to business, said Perez.

“We’re sifting through everything right now,” she said.



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online