

# PARENTS, BE VERY NERVOUS

Parties for teen girls are all the (expensive) rage

BY GENDY ALIMURUNG

**T**he Teen Party Expo came to town recently, and the L.A. Convention Center morphed into what the inside of a young girl's brain must look like: Hot. Bright. Crowded. Confusing. Loud. Sort of like hell, only fluorescent pink.

Picture it, the giddy schizophrenia of a candy booth right next to an orthodontics booth. A bakery booth handing out slices of cake next to a booth hawking Ultra Body Cleanse Plus Pack weight-loss pills. The thump-thump-thump-thump-thumping of dance music. Entering the convention hall, it takes, conservatively, five seconds before your retinas are ready to explode from staring at everything glittered and bedazzled and feather boa-ed and sequined to death.

Coming of age has always been a big deal, but it's only recently become big business. It was endless, really, the amount of stuff you never knew you needed to throw your teen a proper coming-of-age soiree, whether that be a Jewish bat mitzvah, a Filipino debut, a Southern cotillion or a Mexican quinceañera. Now in its third year, the Teen Party Expo was the place to book banquet halls and neon-lighted limousines and choreographers and DJs. It was the place to pick up jeweled bra straps and Body Magic corsets and rhinestone fingernail appliques and invitations so fancy they might as well have been royal proclamations. Even auto insurance companies and AAA were pres-

ent, should dad decide to give his little girl a brand-new car for her 16th birthday.

Hair was its own special madness. Teen-age girls spend an inordinate amount of time considering their hair. Here you could purchase gels, sprays and curling irons to pump up the hair, flat irons to straighten it and Brazilian waxes to remove it.

Some 10,000 girls passed through the Convention Center doors that day: girls in big puffy dresses, and girls in ratty jeans and plastic tiaras. One Miss Teen Asia strolled the grounds in a slinky gown, introducing herself to attendees — "I'm Kaylee, well, it's nice to meet you!" Then, as quickly as she arrived, she was gone, a perfumed cloud of loveliness drifting in her wake.

Parents mostly stayed out of the way, studying price sheets and looking increasingly nervous. One mom stood for quite some time in front of an event planner's booth that was swathed in fluffy pink tulle. Frowning, she moved two booths down to another fluffily decorated table, also in pink. "Now, this I love," she said. The booths were, for all intents and purposes, identical.

Fretting about details such as table ruffles sounds silly. But the money people are prepared to lay out for their offspring's coming-of-age extravaganza is no joke. The mom staring at the frilly tables said she'd spent \$20,000 on her first daughter's quinceañera. She has four daughters and was at the Expo shopping around for her twins. They were going with a Renaissance theme. She never

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had a quinceañera. It's been her dream to do this for her girls. "I gave them a choice," she said. "They could take a trip to Disney World or somewhere instead. Or they could have a party. They chose the party."

Lots of girls choose the party. About 400,000 Hispanic girls celebrate their 15th birthday each year. Their families spend an average of \$15,000 to \$20,000 for these celebrations. Quinceañera and Sweet 16 parties are a \$680 billion-a-year industry, with prom worth \$2.75 billion a year. The Rand Youth Poll, which has done market research on teen buying habits since before this year's batch of teens was born, tells us 13- to 19-year-old females spend \$64 billion a year, including \$31 billion on beauty and

fashion. Snagging a chunk of that power — aka figuring out what girls want — is key.

What do they want?

Candy, apparently. “Candy kabobs are popular,” said the woman from Couture Candy Shoppe, indicating a stick onto which various gummy candies had been pierced. “I’m sooo booked right now.”

“Candy apples are great,” said another saleswoman. The apples were slathered in chocolate, then coated in nuts and marshmallows. “You use it as your place setting and your favor and you’re done!” she said with a huge smile. She rubbed her cheeks, as if she was tired from smiling all day.

“Glitter tattoos are very popular right now,” said the young lady at the glitter tattoo booth. “Your guests get them. Or your court girls get them. The birthday girl can get sweaty from dancing and it won’t come off.” The young lady said she was old now — 22 years old — but she had the tattoos way back when, at her own quinceañera. “And I loved them,” she added. “Loved.”

Also popular: silicone airbrush makeup. “It stays on all day long,” said Blush n Lush’s makeup artist. “Even though your daughter’s gonna be doing her dances. People sleep in it, and it looks as good the next day.”

Imperfections airbrushed over, the girls migrated in packs to the nearby photo booth. A young woman can hardly come of age these days without a rented photo booth at her party. These are the new rituals.

Even the rites of prom — that venerable institution — have changed. “People don’t focus on dates anymore,” said Ashley Vergo, a senior at Central Los Angeles High School for the Visual and Performing Arts. “If you get a date, you get a date. If you don’t, you go with friends.” She shrugged. She was there to check out the limousine services for her group of 12 friends.

Teenage girls are all about change. Aliza Alvarado, 14, had a devil of a time choosing her quinceañera theme. Her parents gave her a budget of \$6,000 and a 2 a.m. curfew. They’d host the party in their backyard. Alvarado considered a rainbow theme (each table with chairs of different colors) but ultimately settled on a Barbie theme.

She’d wear a white mermaid dress, flaring at the ankles. Her hair would be “perfect and tight.” Her makeup, “vibrant.” Her invitations would feature Barbie doll-head silhouettes. Alvarado described the scenario in a quiet, slightly breathless voice, as her two best friends chattered away, jumpy as puppies. Actually, the three girls were functionally more like one, completing each other’s sentences in perfect synchrony.

Alvarado was tiny and shy in sneakers and shorts; it took some imagination to envision her as buxom, wasp-waisted, plastic-perfect Barbie.

Noting her *Twilight* T-shirt, I wondered, did she consider a *Twilight* theme?

“But that would be a little dark,” she said.

Flanked by her two lieutenants, she wandered off.

In half an hour, though, she was back. “Actually, I think *Twilight* would be a really good theme,” she said bashfully. Her lieutenants nodded vigorously. They could picture it: Alvarado in a white dress in a dark room. Candles flickering. Or maybe stars. “The guys could have teeth!” said one. “Little fangs!” said the other.

“And every table could be Team Edward or Team Jacob,” said the first girl.

“And the centerpieces could be apples.”

“Or little wolf heads.”

“So dramatic,” they sighed.

# COMING (BACK) TO AMERICA

In Long Beach, combat veterans learn to get moving again

BY GENDY ALIMURUNG

**H**e was walking through the combat zone when he slipped and fell. Sgt. 1st Class Rorey Nichols landed hard on his lower back. He lay there for a while. He was alone, which was bad. But it was daytime, and he thanked God for that. Slipping sounds stupid. Slipping on your way to the chow hole while carrying 75 to 100 pounds of gear, on a so-called road in Afghanistan that's nothing but rocks and sand, sounds stupid and dangerous. He pulled himself up.

Nichols was no stranger to peril. He'd served in Iraq from 2005 to 2006 and learned that you could be sitting on the toilet when a stray bullet whizzes through the wall and kills you. Or lying in bed — in which case not even a tattoo of the Archangel Michael can protect you. (Nichols got his on his right forearm when he first enlisted.) A decade and a half in the Army inures you to fear. But when he found out he'd broken his spine, for the first time in his life he was scared. Really scared.

Two years, three ruptured spinal discs and one fractured vertebra later, Nichols is standing barefoot on the dock at Peter Archer Rowing Center in Long Beach. He watches a group of injured soldiers gingerly pick their way onto a long, slim boat. They

are learning how to row.

"We were all in pain" in Afghanistan, he says. "We sucked it up and drove it on."

He sucked it up for two weeks after his fall. Then he got slow. He started to worry about not being able to carry a soldier in an emergency. "I was jeopardizing others."

When he finally got checked out, he was told he had a broken back.

"Honestly, I thought they were going to fix me up," he says. It turned out that they couldn't: The injury is permanent. Nichols shrugs. "At least we have this. The vets from Vietnam, they didn't have none of this."

By "this," he means the whole organized recuperation process. When soldiers get injured or wounded on duty, the military sends them to a treatment facility if they need intensive medical care or, if they don't, back home to join a Community Based Warrior Transition Unit, where adaptive sports are part of the drill.

"We don't want soldiers to go back home and plug into an Xbox," says their commander, 1st Lt. Bryan Addington. Rowing, an upper-body sport, is ideal for this particular bunch of soldiers, 80 percent of whom have lower-extremity injuries.

With arms and legs mostly intact, they don't look hurt. Looks, however, are deceptive. "The media doesn't want to interact with people unless they're double amputees

playing basketball," Addington continues, sizing up the troops. "But these guys have just as many problems."

Problems like theirs — orthopedic injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatic brain injuries that have become the "signature injuries" of the Iraq war — are invisible to casual observers. It took Nichols' dad, a former Air Force man, to recognize the classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in his son: anxiety, exaggerated startle response, aversion to crowds, anger.

Today, the sky is overcast. Of the 40 or so soldiers present, Nichols is the only man who isn't in the water rowing. He's a 35-year-old with the back of a 72-year-old. During practice, when his muscles began to seize up, he had to stop.

Absently, he reaches under his shirt and rubs the scar on his flank. The skin is taut and discolored. He taps the hard plastic neural stimulator implanted beneath it. The stimulator confuses his brain, which keeps the nerves from hurting too much, he says. It's not a cure, nor are the trigger-point injections, epidurals and pain meds he takes daily. The pain is always there. He is well acquainted with its many flavors: sharp, shooting, stabbing, prickling. Like a kick in the back. Like a current buzzing down his leg that he can never turn off. Sometimes

only in one leg. Sometimes both.

He gets a lot of groin pain, Nichols says, embarrassed. "Every day is a battle. It's frustrating." His legs are tingling now.

He's lucky. He could have lost a limb. Or he could have been run over by a Humvee. That's what happened to his friend, Army Spc. Gary Griswold. Griswold was out minding his own business when a 16,000-pound Humvee struck him and two other guys. Griswold is a strong, compact tank of a young man. He could bench 275. But the Humvee rolled over him. He grabbed the front of it and was dragged 50 feet. It crushed his spine, face, arms and chest. It broke his jaw in five places, tore the ligaments in his hip and ripped the nerves off his back. It cut open his leg, exposing muscle and bone. When the driver was finally alerted to the situation, he admitted he was distracted. He'd been texting.

Despite that, Griswold says he's not mad — "except when the pain gets unbearable," he laughs. It's almost always unbearable.

Nichols remains on active duty. Asked what kind of work he now does for the military, he answers quietly, "Currently, I go to medical appointments."

He also goes to mandatory conferences — "musters" in military parlance — like this, wherein higher-ups extol physical activity as a key component of the transition back stateside from deployment. You will try. You will adapt. Think there's nothing you can do? There is. And you will do it.

So they do adaptive rowing and archery and kayaking and surfing. Scuba diving was peaceful, Nichols discovered, so different from the hyper-awareness of going on missions: "Your gear isn't heavy because of the buoyancy." He's game for hand cycling. But his former favorites — softball and full-tackle football — are no longer on the menu.

"My life is on hold, kind of," he says, though he'd like to be a counselor someday.

Nichols has no regrets. He believes in this war. He was military police with the National Guard in Bagram Airbase, north of Kabul. One hardly imagines jailers suffering in a prison scenario, but Nichols took

daily abuse from the detainees. They hurled urine and feces. "The things they tell you. That they're going to kill you and kill your family and rape you," he says. "It was a constant beating down. It would burn in you."

Despite that, despite the broken spine, despite the omnipresent pain, he would go back in a heartbeat: "All these guys, even though we're all injured and damaged, we'd go back."

Nichols' commitment is only partly altruism. He likens Afghanistan to free-falling from an airplane — it's an adrenaline rush, a thrill. Coming home to America is when you slam into the pavement.

# INTERVIEW WITH A CORPSE

There are 8 million crime dramas in the naked city.  
Somebody's gotta play dead

BY GENDY ALIMURUNG

**T**he corpse was a video gamer tasered to death by rogue cops. It lay on the autopsy table, trying very hard not to breathe. "There wasn't much time to rehearse," says Justin Schenck, the actor cast in the role of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* cadaver.

The casting company had sent Schenck to be part of a crowd scene in a recent episode of the enduringly popular TV show, but his enthusiastic cheering caught the production team's eye. They plucked him from the crowd and cast him as a dead body.

It was a dubious honor. Like the many corpses who have come before him — the show is now in its 12th year — Schenck wrestled with his dignity, his mortality and his lung capacity.

"It's tougher than it looks. I laid face-down on a table just like this," he says, rapping his knuckles on a wobbly aluminum table. He's at a Subway sandwich shop in a Westwood mini-mall, downstairs from the Risa Sheppard Pilates Studio. He works there as an office assistant, one of two part-time jobs he juggles between auditions.

There's no twitching. No scratching. No blinking. Definitely no breathing. Schenck practiced holding his breath for 30 seconds at a time, then realized he could arch his back to create a small space between the table surface and his ribs. So if he absolutely needed air, at least his whole body wouldn't move up and down. He is sure there are real techniques other actors use to play dead — meditation or whatnot — but he does not know them. There's nothing worse than a wiggly corpse, Schenck thinks. Call him a stickler for verisimilitude, but he always checks to see if the dead bodies in films are breathing. (They usually are.)

Certain physiological responses are uncontrollable. Goose bumps, for instance. The autopsy table was cold, and he hoped his body wouldn't betray him. Schenck, 31, is fit and trim, blessed with quintessential all-American, boyishly handsome good looks. The makeup people applied burns to his neck and shaved his back. "I was naked from the waist up. It's the only time I ever took my shirt off for a part," he grins.

Granted, there isn't much to do as a corpse. They tell you where to put your arms and how to tilt your chin. He mostly lay there listening to the visual effects crew debate the accuracy of his Taser burn marks — are they supposed to be three centimeters apart, or four?

He believes he was convincing as a dead guy. Perhaps too convincing. At one point, the visual effects crew forgot he was there and left. There he lay, by himself, facedown on the slab until a crew member remembered he was still there. "I'm so sorry, man," he told him. "You can get up and go get some snacks."

"It's OK," Schenck said. "I think I'll just lie here and pretend to be dead a little longer."

The money's not bad. It's not good, but it's not bad. Just to play the body, he received \$125 for an eight-hour day.

But it was, Schenck concludes, boring. There was a lot of waiting. A lot of standing around, staring at Laurence Fishburne (who has since left the series), trying not to make an ass of himself by saying something stupid like, "Excuse me, Mr. Fishburne, but I really loved you in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3*."

Being a *CSI* extra was Schenck's first TV role, though not his first as a corpse. Before that, he played, yes, a dead body in the film *F.D.R.: American Badass!*, in which the nation's 32nd president fights the forces of evil with machine guns strapped to his wheelchair. It was a more complex role than *CSI*: He actually got to act before he was killed.

In Schenck's scene, the Mob, run by werewolves, is importing poisoned liquor into the country. Roosevelt shows up in his wheelchair of death and mows the werewolves down in a hail of bullets. Schenck, portraying a werewolf, shudders, falls to his knees and tries not to screw up the three-hour makeup job — prosthetics are expensive.

"Good-natured ribbing" is how he characterizes the reaction of friends and family to his knack for getting cast as a corpse.

"Wow. You've found a niche, Justin," they said. "As long as you don't speak or move, you'll be working."

"Everyone's so cynical," he says, scowling. Everyone except his mother. "Are you going to put it on your reel?" she asked of the *CSI* role.

"No, mom. That is not something you put on a reel."

He sighs. "It's not quite acting, and it's not quite being a production assistant," Schenck says. "Because those people are busy." It's more like being a piece of scenery. It's also a double-edged sword: You want to show your face, but if you do, they can't ever use you again.

Luckily, Schenck does not consider himself one of those "If I couldn't act, I'd die" types. He came to Los Angeles from Denver 12 years ago to write and direct.

That said, playing dead is "not demeriting," Schenck says. "You do it by choice. It's a good notch to have."

All things considered, Schenck is grateful to have been on such a popular show. He's in good company: Early in his career, Kevin Costner played a corpse in *The Big Chill*.

Alas, much like Costner's speaking scenes in *The Big Chill*, Schenck's dead body scene in *CSI* Season 11, Episode 18, ultimately wound up on the cutting room floor. When the scene featuring the dead man aired recently, Schenck was nowhere to be seen. They'd chucked him in favor of a fatter corpse.