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## Dancing the Night Away, With a Higher Purpose

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

COLORADO SPRINGS — In their floor-length gowns, up-dos and tiaras, the 70 or so young women swept past two harpists and into a gilt-and-brocade dining room at the lavish Broadmoor Hotel, on the arms of their much older male companions.

The girls, ages early grade school to college, had come with their fathers, stepfathers and future fathers-in-law last Friday night to the ninth annual Father-Daughter Purity Ball. The first two hours of the gala passed like any somewhat awkward night out with parents, the men doing nearly all the talking and the girls struggling to cut their chicken.

But after dessert, the 63 men stood and read aloud a covenant “before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity.”

The gesture signaled that the fathers would guard their daughters from what evangelicals consider a profoundly corrosive “hook-up culture.” The evening, which alternated between homemade Christian rituals and giddy dancing, was a joyous public affirmation of the girls’ sexual abstinence until they wed.

Yet the graying men in the shadow of their glittering daughters were the true focus of the night. To ensure their daughters’ purity, they were asked to set an example and to hew to evangelical ideals in a society they say tempts them as much as it does their daughters.

“It’s also good for me,” said Terry Lee, 54, who attended the ball for a second year, this time with his youngest daughter, Rachel, 16. “It inspires me to be spiritual and moral in turn. If I’m holding them to such high standards, you can be sure I won’t be cheating on their mother.”

Relying on word-of-mouth that brought families mostly from the thriving evangelical community in Colorado Springs and from as far as Virginia and California, Randy and Lisa Wilson built their Purity Ball into an annual gala that costs about \$10,000, financed by ticket sales. This year, about 150 people attended the dinner, purity ceremony and dance.

The purity pledges for the fathers to sign stood in the middle of the dinner tables. Unlike other purity balls, the daughters here do not make a pledge, said Amanda Robb, a New York-based writer researching a book about the abstinence movement who was at the Broadmoor event.

“Fathers, our daughters are waiting for us,” Mr. Wilson, 49, told the men. “They are desperately waiting for us in a culture that lures them into the murky waters of exploitation. They need to be rescued by you, their dad.”

The Wilsons organized what was considered the country’s first father-daughter purity ball 10 years ago, as their oldest girls entered adolescence. Randy Wilson is the national field director of church ministries for the Family Research Council, a conservative advocacy group, and Lisa Wilson is a stay-at-home mom.

“The culture says you’re free to sleep with as many people as you want to,” said Khrystian Wilson, 20, one of the Wilsons’ seven children, including five girls. “What does that get you but complete chaos?”

For the Wilsons and the growing number of people who have come to their balls, premarital sex is seen as inevitably destructive, especially to girls, who they say suffer more because they are more emotional than boys. Fathers, they say, play a crucial role in helping them stay pure.

“Something I need from dad is affirmation, being told I’m beautiful,” said Jordyn Wilson, 19, another daughter of Randy and Lisa. “If we don’t get it from home, we will go out to the culture and get it from them.”

Recent studies have suggested that close relationships between fathers and daughters can reduce the risk of early sexual activity among girls and teenage pregnancy. But studies have also shown that most teenagers who say they will remain abstinent, like those at the ball, end up having sex before marriage, and they are far less likely to use condoms than their peers.

No one knows for certain how many purity balls are held nationwide, because they are grass-roots efforts. The Abstinence Clearinghouse, an advocacy group, says it sells hundreds of purity ball kits annually to interested groups all over the country and abroad.

Abstinence is never mentioned at the Colorado Springs Purity Ball, but a litany of fathers’ duties is — mainly, making time to get involved in their daughters’ lives and setting an example.

In a ballroom after dinner, bare but for a seven-foot wooden cross at one end, the fathers and daughters gathered along the walls. Kevin Moore, there with his three girls, told the men they were taking a stand for their families and their nation. Then he and Mr. Wilson walked to the cross with two large swords, which they held up before it to make an arch.

Each father and his daughter walked under the arch and knelt before the cross. Synthesized hymns played. The fathers sometimes held their daughters and whispered a short prayer, and then the girls each placed a white rose, representing purity, at the foot of the cross. Mr. Lee and Rachel walked away holding hands.

The girls, many wearing purity rings, made silent vows. “I promise to God and myself and my family that I

will stay pure in my thoughts and actions until I marry,” said Katie Swindler, 16.

Her father, Jim, said he brought her to show her how much he cherished her after almost losing her in a car accident two years ago.

Loss tinged many at the ball. Stephen Clark, 64, came to the ball for the first time with Ashley Avery, 17, who is “promised” to his son, Zane, 16. Mr. Clark brought Ashley, in her white satin gown, to show her that he loved her like a daughter, he said, something he felt he needed to underscore after Ashley’s father left her family a year ago.

Mrs. Wilson, the organizer, said that her father abandoned her family when she was 2, and that Mr. Wilson’s father was distant. One father said he had terminal cancer and came with his two daughters. Others were trying to do better in their second marriages.

“I’ve heard from fathers that this challenged them, to guard their own eyes, for example,” Mr. Wilson said. “It is a call to covenant which basically says I as my daughter’s father will be a man of integrity and purity.”

If most teenage girls would not be caught dead dancing with their dads, the girls at the ball twirled for hours with their game but stiff fathers. Every half-hour, Mr. Wilson stopped the dancing so that fathers could bless their daughters before everyone.

The dancing continued past the ball’s official end at midnight. Mr. Wilson had to tell people to go home. The fathers took their flushed and sometimes sleepy girls toward the exit. But one father took his two young daughters for a walk around the hotel’s dark, glassy lake.

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