

## **First Polk County Bridal Exhibit and Marketplace showcases vendors to local brides**

**By: Carmel Delshad**

LAKELAND— At the first Polk County Bridal Exhibit and Marketplace, the champagne flowed generously as wedding vendors were showcased for the beaming brides-to-be.

The event, which took place at the Polk Museum of Art on September 28, attracted about 600 guests and 42 vendors from Polk County, according to Kim Simpson, media relations manager for the bridal exhibit.

“[We wanted] to get the large shows back in the area so that the brides wouldn’t have to travel to Tampa and Orlando,” Simpson said.

Upon entering the museum, each bride was given a “Bridal Passport,” which she carried from vendor-to-vendor. Each vendor then stamped the passport and, with all 42 stamps in place, the bride was officially entered into the grand prize giveaway for the “Ultimate Bachelorette Party,” valued at over \$1,250.

Brides carried white mesh tote bags which were filled with business cards and magazines of the latest Florida fashions, specifically tailored for southern weddings.

Seminars were also held and led by leading event planners from the local area. Topics ranged from budgeting ideas to do-it-yourself favors.

“At this time, we are the largest bridal show [in Polk County], with over 40 vendors. We hold seminars, which I think makes [the show] unique,” Simpson said.

Paneitria Johnson, a local bride, said the show helped her to narrow down her vendor choices for her June 27 wedding.

“I’m just trying to get an idea where to start at for the wedding because we have a location, but everything else we don’t have,” Johnson said.

“I’m trying to be more involved. I liked the honeymoon book, which was really nice,” added Johnson’s fiancé, Watson Casimir, with a smile.

Johnson enlisted the help of her sister, Pakeishia, and appointed her as the official wedding planner. Both were present at the show and carried bridal bags that were stuffed with business cards and magazines.

“I’m helping her out, I do a lot of the organizing and preparing for the budget because I’m an accountant,” Pakeishia said.

“I’m working too; I’m still trying to figure out if I want the food to be buffet-style or sit-down. And I need to find a dress. I haven’t seen any here yet that I’ve fallen in love with,” said bride Paneitria Johnson.

Both agreed that the show aided in exposing otherwise unknown vendors to the public.

“Seeing different samples and the photos, going beyond the scope of the people that we know in the local area really helps,” Pakeishia added.

No detail was overlooked, as each vendor had a unique product to market. From florists, caterers and videographers to event planners, DJs and reception facilities, the bridal exhibition provided exposure for

the numerous local retailers.

Ken Whelpley, co-owner of Angelique Bridal in Winter Haven, said the show gave his bridal store extra publicity in the Polk County market.

“We get a chance to touch base with all the brides, future brides, wannabe brides and everybody in the industry,” Whelpley said.

The latest bridal fashions, from stores such as Jannabelle’s Bridal Boutique, TJ’s Formal Wear and Whelpley’s Angelique Bridal, were displayed in individual fashion shows. Models floated down the cool marbled floor of the museum and politely paused for a barrage of pictures for the smitten brides.

Bustled ball gowns, A-line dresses, bejeweled tiaras and feminine detailing prevailed on the catwalk. Iridescent fabrics showcased the ethereal bridal style, just one of the many looks offered by the boutiques. Bridesmaid’s dresses were also modeled in the fashion show, as were tuxedos and other menswear.

Kim Simpson recalled the comments from the brides and noted that the feedback would be utilized for the next bridal show coming in spring 2009.

“I think [the brides] were just overwhelmed, they had no idea that there would be that many vendors. And being able to get the tote bags, a lot of them were so surprised with that. We’ve been hearing a lot of good things,” Simpson said.

Planning for the next bridal show is already underway. Simpson said the show, set for March 2009, is a necessity because many women get engaged during the holiday season and will start planning in the spring for their upcoming nuptials. She hopes that the expo will bring unique exhibitors to the forefront, beyond the scope of the internet.

“I think it helps the vendors. There are certain things that brides plan right in the beginning. It’s an extension, but there will still be use and need for the internet and advertising venues. I think the show would just enhance that and make it better,” Simpson said.