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Reality TV? A Sweet 16 party in Valley goes to excess for MTV

Ofelia Madrid

The Arizona Republic
Nov. 6, 2005 12:00 AM

Call it the ultimate home video.

For many girls turning 16, the Sweet 16 party is a small gathering of friends at home or a favorite restaurant.

But for one Scottsdale teen, the event has turned into the party of the year for students at Desert Mountain High School in north Scottsdale. MTV is in town to film it for *My Super Sweet 16*, a documentary-style TV show that follows teens as they plan Sweet 16 parties with budgets upward of \$200,000.



Republic three years ago that she wanted to be an MTV star by the time she was 15.

MTV says that the show's goal is to document a coming-of-age story and that the show allows the viewer to live vicariously through the personalities of the teens hosting the party.

The Scottsdale party details are closely held. Rumor has it that the party was this weekend at a northeast Valley resort. The theme was hot pink and included a pool dyed to match. The invitations didn't list a time or a place, just a site where to meet to be whisked away to the actual party.

Event planner Amy Petrovsky, who owns Scottsdale-based Sensational Events, said creating a buzz is part of hosting a great party. She's used to planning high-end private and corporate events like the birthday parties on the MTV show.

"Anything you can do to catch people by surprise is good," Petrovsky said. "You want them to start talking about it. You want to start getting that buzz, then all of a sudden there's this anxiousness for the event."

But with a budget like the ones on the MTV show, it's usually a wedding, not a Sweet 16 party.

MTV doesn't comment on shows in production and wouldn't even confirm that it was filming every stage of Marissa Leigh's party. But the MTV cameras outside of Desert Mountain a few weeks ago while the girl handed out her invitations were a small giveaway.

Marissa and her family also aren't allowed to talk about the party. But she told *The Arizona*

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Party planning

The first thing Amy Petrovsky of Sensational Events does for her clients is find an interesting venue for the party.

After talking over ideas, she presents the client with a budget. The client decides what to cut and what to add. But she tells her clients that entertainment is key. Things must flow or guests will get bored. Petrovsky's clients like out-of-the-box ideas that include costumes and music. "That kind of stuff is really fun, but it does cost money," she says.

Ultimately, no matter what the cost, people throw parties because they love bringing people together and want their guests to share in the special moment, Petrovsky says.

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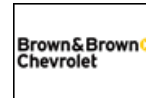
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Parties for elite group

"You're talking about a very elite group of people," Petrovsky said.

Linda Torkelson, who has a sophomore daughter at Desert Mountain, said the party has definitely created a buzz among the students.

"I'm from the Midwest, and people just don't do this sort of thing," Torkelson said. "That level of a party seems ridiculous."

The Scottsdale mom has watched the MTV show and called it disgusting. "We just laugh at it. This age is difficult enough. I find the whole show distasteful," she said.

Many of Lauren Brueckner's friends had Sweet 16 parties, but they usually consisted of a close group of friends. "This is never heard of," the Desert Mountain junior said.

Parent Sue Skidmore of Phoenix didn't have a Sweet 16 party for her daughters but did have something similar when they turned 15.

"Both had 15th birthday parties here at our house, they weren't catered, we made the food and one of them had a disc jockey that had been a former student," Skidmore said.

"They weren't outlandish, and they didn't cost more than \$200. There's absolutely no way we would spend even \$5,000 on a party for a Sweet 16."

Obsessed with reality TV

Greg Wise, associate professor of communications studies at Arizona State University West, calls the show just another part of Americans' obsession with youth culture and reality television.

"In some way such shows have a sense of tongue-in-cheek and irony," Wise said. "It's always ironic, wink, wink, we know we're being excessive."

It also ties in with the fact that today's teens have grown up with reality television and have watched enough TV to know how to play to TV, he said.

"There's something in society that we want to preserve everything," Wise said. "We videotape everything. We have our own films and recordings and photographs of every event. What we're seeing, in a way, is a glorified home movie."

'Revolting set of values'

Mary-Lou Galician head of media analysis and criticism at ASU said the show sells a "revolting set of values."

"MTV is always pushing the envelope," Galician said. "It doesn't mean that people shouldn't throw parties for their children, but these are bratty kids that cry if they don't get a \$75,000 car. And we wonder why other countries don't think well of our country."

The concept for the show came from MTV producer Nina Diaz's personal experience of having a Sweet 16 party.

"I had the average American teenager party in my grandmother's community center," she said. "It was still fun, but I had delusions if the whole day could be about me, and I had no budget."

Now in her 30s, Diaz knows that her show has resonated with the viewers. *My Super Sweet 16* had the highest rated premier in MTV history and will be back for a third season next year.

To critics, Diaz said the show isn't meant to be a representation of American teens.

"These are nine kids who are outrageous and going for over-the-top parties. It's a small percentage of the population," Diaz said.

"That's why it's a fantasy, this isn't what the average American kid is going to be able to attain, but it's fun to watch."

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