

Kids with cancer get star treatment

by John Wilkens

For most teens, the prom is a reason to dress up. For Kristin Hansen, 18, it was a reason to live.

STAR TREATMENT - Cancer patient Angela Smith, right, and her guest Tanzania Guest wave to the crowd as they arrive for the prom at the Hall of Champions in San Diego's Balboa Park. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. CANCER PATIENT - Daniella Ayon, 11, of Chula Vista, Calif., wears a tiara atop the brunette wig she'd had fitted earlier in the day to cover her hair loss from treatments to combat her cancer. CNS Photo by Laura Embry. She was diagnosed with kidney cancer 18 months ago, in the fall of her senior year in high school. Doctors removed the kidney, then gave her six months of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation.

Her hair fell out. She felt awful, lost a lot of weight. But an invitation to the prom kept her going.

"When your life is all about treatment, when every day is about drugs and transfusions, it's really exciting to have something fun to look forward to," she said. "It helps get you up in the morning."

Recently, Kristin and about 120 other youngsters whose lives have been upended by cancer had their own prom at the Hall of Champions in San Diego's Balboa Park. Organizers said it was the first of its kind, and hope to make it an annual event.

The kids, who came from all over San Diego County, got the star treatment, thanks to donations from about

50 area businesses: free dresses or tuxedos, free limousine rides, a red-carpet entrance amid flashing cameras and adoring fans.

Children as young as 11 were invited, a recognition that for some of them, this wasn't just their first chance to experience this time-honored rite of passage, but might be their last.

For others, some in their 20s and now in remission, it was an opportunity to make up for high school proms they missed because they were ill.

"We just want it to be a night of fun, to let them forget about their cancer," said Anna Sciarrino, chair of the prom committee.

Judging from the smiles of the well-coiffed as they arrived, fun it was. "I've never been to prom," said Leo Kilian, 17, a brain-tumor survivor. "I'm just excited about having a good time."

Sergio Dominguez, 12, said he was looking forward to seeing friends he met while being treated at the hospital for lymphoma - "and seeing them well."

Some of the kids were bashful, but others basked in the cheers as they walked between rows of well-wishers - including some doctors and nurses.

"Looking good, Luis!" a woman called out to Luis Ayon, 16, who was wearing dark glasses like a movie star. He'd been scheduled for a bone-marrow transplant just days before but postponed it because he was afraid it might make him too weak for the prom.

His sister, Daniella Ayon, 11, walked behind him, drawing shouts of encouragement, too, in a brunette wig she'd had fitted earlier in the day to cover the hair loss from her own cancer treatment.

Inside the hall, under a giant statue of boxer Rocky Balboa, his arms raised in triumph, they enjoyed pizza and loud music, and for a few hours anyway, the cherished feeling of belonging, of fitting in. Nobody batted an eye at bald heads or faces swollen by medication.

"When you have cancer, it gives you a different point of view about life," said Gilberto Felipe Tigerina, 17. "It makes you appreciate things. Like this."

The idea for the prom came from Some of My Best Friends Are Bald, a peer group for teens with cancer that meets monthly in San Diego at Rady Children's Hospital.

They in turn approached the Friends of Scott Foundation, a nonprofit group that assists young cancer patients and their families. It was created in memory of Scott Delgadillo, a 14-year-old San Diego boy who died of leukemia six years ago.

The foundation put out the word and "the community just came together," Sciarrino said. Donations poured in: cash, food, flowers, balloons, entertainment.

Dozens of dresses were donated, and fittings arranged. Tuxes were ordered. Pick-up sites - 11 of them, spaced around the county - were set up for the kids to catch their limo rides.

Half the fun of any prom is the anticipation, and this event was no exception. Earlier in the afternoon, about two dozen girls went to the foundation's offices on Sports Arena Boulevard for complimentary hairstyling and makeup.

Katie Rose Hann, who turns 11 soon, looked thrilled as her hair was piled on top of her head. It has grown back nicely after it fell out during treatment for leukemia.

The new look was topped by a silver tiara that Katie got on a Make-A-Wish trip she took two Decembers ago to Disney World in Florida, where she met Cinderella. She said she was excited about dancing later in her

pink gown.

The cancer patients were allowed to bring a date or a friend to the prom. Leo Kilian asked his sister, Erin, 28, also a cancer survivor. Katelyn Craker, 12, brought her 11-year-old sister, Kortney, as a thank-you for helping her battle a tumor that doctors initially thought might force them to amputate her right arm.

As the Craker sisters got their hair and makeup done, their mother, Kristen, took photos and - like almost everybody else in the room - couldn't stop smiling.

"From something so awful, they get to experience so much joy," she said. "The outpouring of generosity and compassion from the community is amazing."

No parents were allowed inside the Hall of Champions (except for one whose daughter needed special assistance). "We want them to feel like it's a real prom," Sciarrino said.

The parents didn't mind. "So many of these kids don't go to their high school dances, and even those who do go aren't really accepted because they are different," said Peggy Kilian, Leo's mother. "Here they can all be together and just be themselves and not be judged or excluded."

It was dark inside the hall, but it was easy to see Carmen Delgadillo's eyes dance with emotion. She is board president of the Friends of Scott Foundation, which is named after her son.

She watched the happy youngsters, all dressed up with somewhere to go. It had all come together. "Scott," she said, "would have loved this."

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