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Kids get a second chance to attend their prom

Evan Henerson
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When she received a new kidney via transplant, Altadena teen Ishrat Khan quickly set herself a modest but attainable goal.

Weight loss.

"When I was in dialysis, I put on a lot of weight that I couldn't really get rid of because it was water weight," recalls Khan, who got the new kidney six years ago when she was all of 13.

"As a teenager, (losing weight) is pretty much what everybody wants to do," she explains, happy to report the effort was a success.

And the critical transplant led to other surprising adjustments. Accustomed as she'd been to vomiting every morning, she had to re-learn normal bathroom patterns. And sleep became easier once a catheter in her stomach no longer caused a machine to beep at her when she rolled over on her belly.

Khan shared these memories outside the gym at Notre Dame High School in Sherman Oaks, site of the 8th annual Renal Teen Prom held Jan. 14.

Khan has been to the event — which unites teenagers and young adults with kidney disease from all over the state for an evening of revelry — a half-dozen times.

Six years after her transplant, she is now a psychology major at UC Riverside.

If ever there was a gathering celebrating the teen desire to do what everyone else is doing, the Renal Teen Prom is it.

For a single glamorous night, the regular routine of machines, medications, hospitals and doctor visits is moved to the back burner.

This year's attendees posed for caricature artists and glamor photos, rocked out to the music of Prince and Aqua, took limo rides and collected autographs from special celebrity guests including Sinbad, Gary Sinise and "Spy Kids" teen-star Alexa Vega.

They noshed on specially prepared, renal-friendly snacks and drink — no alcohol or dark colas — and gabbed on "Kidney Talk," an Internet radio program hosted by The Renal Support Network, its founder Lori Hartwell and actor Stephen Furst.

In keeping with the "Midnight at the Oasis" theme, the gym was decorated floor-to-ceiling to depict a Middle Eastern fantasy, complete with indoor trees.

As its creators hoped, the evening was about community, normalcy and — above all — fun.

"There's no such thing as a really normal life," admits Kami Ward, a Notre Dame senior who served as the event chairperson,

"but a lot of the kids invited here because of their hospital visits and medication are very limited. I think it's a great thing that we can give them one normal teenage night.

"Everybody talks about their prom," she adds. "The fact that we can put one on for other people is great."

The prom is the brainchild of RSN's Hartwell, who missed her own senior prom while battling kidney disease. As an adult, she founded RSN as a non-profit resource center for people with chronic kidney disease. More than 1.4 million people worldwide suffer from the disease.

Partnering with Notre Dame, corporate sponsors such as Amgen and hundreds of volunteers, RSN has seen its event grow from 70 attendees to more than 400 this year.

"This illness is too demanding when you don't have hope," says Hartwell. "Others who live with this illness can lead successful lives even with chronic kidney disease. I want them to connect with others who understand that experience. Year after year, this prom is a reunion where people can connect via (the) shared experience of strength and hope."

Of course standout stylin' plays a major role too.

A sharply dressed Kyle Allred, 17, of Brea picked up a new suit,

shirt and tie for the occasion and arrived at his first Renal Teen Prom with his girlfriend Elizabeth Erskine at his side.

"Pretty cool," was Kyle's carefully worded appraisal of the scene. His father Gordon and step-mother Mary — on hand in a separate Notre Dame lounge — filled in some details:

Kyle's single kidney went into distress just over a year ago when doctors determined he had suffered a stroke. The teen spent three months in the hospital and was subsequently home schooled. He's back in class now, awaiting a transplant (his mother will likely be the donor) and working to regain his strength before rejoining the school water polo team.

When the Renal Teen Prom comes to an end, Kyle will be hooked up to a machine — as he is six times a week — to undergo peritoneal dialysis. While he sleeps, a solution is filtered through a catheter in his stomach to flush the toxins from his blood.

If the rigors of living with kidney disease are onerous, you won't hear Kyle complaining, says his step-mother.

"He's 17 and he thinks he's invincible," Mary Allred explains with a smile. "He was lying in a hospital bed with tubes all in him, and he wasn't worried about a thing."

Jenny Huey — another regular prom attendee — knows all about

the life interruptions that come with a serious medical condition. The night of her senior prom, Huey was in the hospital undergoing her second kidney transplant.

"The biggest night of the year and I had to miss it," says Huey, whose kidney first failed when she was 2 years old. "I just remember, I always had in the back of my head, 'God, I wish I could have attended.' So now this is what I do."

The Renal Teen Prom welcomes guests ranging from pre-teen to people in their early to mid 20s.

This year Huey, 25, "graduated" from attendee to prom volunteer. And the event took on an extra family dimension because her younger sister Caitlyn, 17, is a Notre Dame senior who served on the school's event committee.

Huey's battle with chronic kidney disease clearly is a family struggle. Huey's father donated a kidney for an earlier transplant, and her brother will be the donor for her third transplant this year.

Caitlyn is not old enough to donate an organ, but she gives blood and plenty of moral support.

"When I rejected the second transplant, I was on a respirator for about a week," recalls Huey. "Maybe it was that sisterly bond, but she was the only one who could communicate to my parents what I needed just by looking at

me. If I feel bad or if things are getting kind of tough, she's there to pull me up."

"My sister," returns Caitlyn, "is the strongest person I've ever met. She's been through so many things, and I can't even imagine how she's done it."

CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE (CKD)

What is it?: A progressive loss of kidney function over time. With CKD, the kidneys lose their ability to remove waste and excess fluid from the body.

What causes it?: Diabetes and hypertension (high blood pressure) are primary causes.

Who gets it?: It's estimated that 20 million Americans have CKD, while an additional 20 million are at risk. CKD is high in minority populations, including Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders and American Indians.

Symptoms of CKD: Fatigue or weakness, abnormal urination, nausea, vomiting, feeling cold all the time, insomnia, swelling or numbness in the hands and feet, puffiness around the eyes, muscle twitching in the legs, itchy skin or a metallic taste in the mouth.

End-stage renal disease: When a person reaches stage 5, he or she must either receive a kidney transplant or get dialysis.

(Source: Renal Support Network, www.rsnhope.org.)