

These kids a class act

Teens with cancer earn diplomas while studying during hospital stays

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Watts/News

Samantha Simon gets a hug from teacher Mary Ellen Fitzsimmons yesterday during graduation ceremony for cancer patients at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.

Samantha Simon's cancer doesn't quit - but neither does she.

Despite two years of on-and-off chemotherapy for bone cancer, Samantha is set to graduate from high school on time and earn a Regents diploma through the city Education Department's Hospital Schools program.

"Anything in this world is possible. I believe that to the fullest," said Samantha, 17, a senior at Brooklyn College Academy.

Samantha was one of 15 cap-and-gown-clad teen cancer patients who walked the stage at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center yesterday. Technically, it wasn't a graduation; the students will get diplomas at their original schools.

But despite the circumstances, there was plenty of pomp.

"You are individuals who have taught us what the best of humanity is," the hospital's pediatric department chairman, Dr. Richard O'Reilly, told the students. "You have faced your dragons and taken your lives to a new dimension."

The hospital tutoring program, which is in 42 local hospitals, helped an estimated 4,500 students of all grades this year - at times going to extraordinary lengths.

"We really are their school while they're in the hospital," said program Principal Mary Maher. "I had a student in a car accident who asked to take the global studies Regents. He worked with the state to take it by lipreading and eye-blinking."

Samantha, a star student in the program, has fought the same cancer as her late mother.

In 2005, doctors discovered her left knee contained osteosarcoma, a bone cancer that killed her mom in 1994.

As Samantha left school to begin radiation therapy, the Hospital Schools helped her along.

From her bed at Sloan-Kettering, Samantha studied economics and chemistry and read James McBride's "The Color of Water" for English class.

When Samantha was too weak to hold her book, teacher Mary Ellen Fitzsimmons held it. When Samantha couldn't focus her eyes, Fitzsimmons read aloud.

"Some days, she didn't feel well, but we did it anyway," said Fitzsimmons.

Samantha was devastated when doctors discovered that cancer had spread to her lungs and back. She worried her grandmother "would have to bury her daughter and her daughter's daughter."

Still, her goal was to graduate on time.

"I wanted to graduate with my friends," she said. "I didn't want to graduate at 18 or 19."

She scored an 86 on her English Regents and a 90 in U.S. history. She will graduate at her school this month and go to Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn this fall.

"It's just a miracle that I'm still here," she said. "I did what I wanted to do."



Elizabeth Henry (left) and Wanda Reynoso receive congratulations. Photos by Susan Watts