

## VALOR-DICTORY FEARLESS CANCER KIDS GRADUATE HS

By CHUCK BENNETT



**TRUE GRIT:** Cancer survivor Megan Popkin huddles with siblings Jackson and Kelly yesterday.

June 14, 2007 -- Some dragged their IV drips, some wore wigs, but 15 cancer-fighting teenagers all donned gowns and mortarboards at a special graduation ceremony at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center yesterday.

The event, the first of its kind at the country's premier cancer hospital, honored its young patients who have now graduated from high school despite surgeries and arduous cycles of chemotherapy.

"You are wiser than we will ever be," Dr. Richard O'Reilly, chairman of the pediatrics department, told the graduates and their families.

Indeed, many of the students voiced a view on life found only in people who have already faced death.

"With every cycle of chemotherapy, I have learned more about myself and my own cycles of ups and downs," said Harvard-bound Megan Popkin, a graduate of Marymount HS in Manhattan, who survived the fast-growing, highly malignant muscle cancer rhabdomyosarcoma.

Popkin delivered the graduate address, which she dedicated to her fellow "patients and students."

Popkin, like many of her classmates who spent their teen years in hospitals and doctors' offices, is dreaming of a career in medicine.

"The first thing I would have done was use the cancer as an excuse to stop studying," said Popkin's proud father, Steven. "Thank God she's tough."

Another aspiring doctor, Sylvia Hyra, hobbled onto the stage on crutches. The 18-year-old, who is graduating from Clifton HS in New Jersey, is a leukemia survivor and recovering from a leg infection.

"I'm just happy and excited, really excited to be here," she said. This fall, she will attend Rider University in New Jersey.

For 30 years, the Department of Education has provided teachers to patients at the hospital so they can keep up with their peers and graduate on time. Some patients spend months at a time in hospitals for treatment and recovery from surgery.

Wanda Reynoso, an 18-year-old senior wearing a platinum-blond wig, had a bone-marrow transplant on May 1, but will graduate with her class from Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom HS in The Bronx.

"I'm so happy," she said. "I dedicate all of this to my mother; she was with me all the way."

As for her future, she said, "Right now, I'm fighting my disease."

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Sylvia Hyraproudly clutches her diploma.