

Los Angeles Times

January 15, 2007

Youths who missed their senior prom get a night to remember Dreams dashed by kidney disease are fulfilled with dancing, limousine rides and professional photos at Sherman Oaks school

By Adrian Uribarri
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Her junior year in high school had just begun when Jasmine Bedell's telephone rang with the news she had been waiting for years to hear: A donor kidney had been located. The transplant ended five long years of dialysis treatments.

It also ended her dream of attending her senior prom.

After the operation, a draining regimen of medications to stop her body from rejecting the new organ forced Bedell to drop out of school. She later earned a general equivalency diploma, but had missed a teenage milestone.

"Everybody talks about how they went to the prom and how much fun it was," she said. "It felt like I'm the only person who didn't get to go."
Not anymore.

On Sunday, the 17-year-old spent the evening dancing at Sherman Oaks' Notre Dame High School, more than a thousand miles from her home in Westminster, Colo., thanks to donations from nurses at her local hospital.

She attended the eighth annual Renal Teen Prom, where more than 300 youths with kidney disease and their guests came to do one thing: party.

"They have a night that they will never forget," said Lori Hartwell, who started the event in 1999 through her national support group, Glendale-based Renal Support Network. "They can just dance the night away."

Hartwell, 40, missed her own prom because of kidney disease. She was diagnosed with the illness when she was 2, and by 17 had undergone two transplants.

"I wanted to help other people who went through what I went through," she said. "I spent all of my teenage years on dialysis."

The event began as a small dance in Notre Dame's cafeteria, with about 80 guests from Southern California. Back then, Hartwell had to beg for volunteers to organize and run the event.

This year, more than 100 people helped put together the prom on a budget of about \$50,000. Prom-goers are not charged to attend the event, which is sponsored by corporate donors, mostly healthcare firms.

A Hollywood designer created sets for the theme "Midnight at the Oasis." Notre Dame students unloaded and set up decorations. At the event, guests took 20-minute joyrides in limousines and had their portraits taken by a professional photographer.

Nancy Vargas, 20, had her photo taken with friend Dahyana Palaez, 21, before walking in to the dance. Vargas had to miss her prom at Franklin High School in Los Angeles because she was in the hospital. She is on dialysis, waiting for a transplant.

"It means a lot because I can meet people who had a transplant already," she said. "And they can give advice on how to progress in life and not give up."

The high school senior said she wants to study nursing to help others with kidney disease.

Prom-goers also met celebrities including Alexa Vega, Sinbad and Gary Sinise, whose daughter is a senior at Notre Dame. "Any time the kids get treated special, it means a lot to them," said Malia Langen, a board member of Renal Support Network. "It gets them to not think about their day-to-day lives and medical care."

Langen, a development assistant in the television industry, has been working on the prom for years and has known about the event since 2001, when she was a 24-year-old graduate student at Loyola Marymount University. She spent five of her teenage years on dialysis before receiving a kidney from her mother.

On Sunday night, Langen was among dozens of volunteers driving guests from their homes to the prom. She said it is during those trips that she has the greatest impact.

"I tell them that I went away to college and to grad school," she said. "When I share my story, they realize there are options, that they can pursue their dreams and have a life outside of kidney disease."

During the prom, Bedell's dark-blue dress flapped around as she tapped the dance floor in strappy sandals.

"I'm thinking about going to college to become a nurse," she said earlier. "It would be good for the kids to have someone who can really relate to what they're going through."