



Extraordinary People. Extraordinary Lives. Welcome...

Pediatrics is always a hotbed of activity, and this season was no different. Over the past few months, we've hosted two very important gatherings, including our first Convocation Celebration, in recognition of the more than 42 high school graduating seniors who are, or once were, patients at MSKCC. We also held our annual Pediatric Prom to celebrate all the remarkable Pediatric patients, families, and staff members. In this issue of News9, we'd like to share with you highlights from those special events, and introduce you to some of the people who make Pediatrics an extraordinary place.



Convocation Celebration...

It started out as a simple question: *who is graduating from high school this year and how can we recognize such a major accomplishment?* The list began with a few names, perhaps 12. Then a teacher, a doctor, a social worker, would add another name, and another... until, on the day of our Convocation, we recognized a total of 42 patients who had graduated from high school or received their GED in 2007. Some of the graduates were on active treatment and others had been in remission for years, but each one had a story of determination and great achievement.

The Ceremony...

We invited the graduates, their families, our hospital school teachers and principal to join members of the MSKCC community to celebrate this special occasion. It was standing room only. A total of 15 graduates representing the class of 2007 proceeded down the center aisle of the Recreation Center to Johann Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz" and took their seats at the front of the stage. Welcoming them to the ceremony was Nina J. Pickett, Administrator of Pediatrics. Next to speak was Megan Popkin, who delivered the graduate address. In remission for two years, and attending Harvard University in the fall, she spoke about her struggle with cancer and what she learned along the way. Megan remarked on the graduates' shared experience, saying, "I am certain that this special class of 2007 can reflect upon many trials that our high school careers have thrown in our path... including the fact that we have faced, or are currently facing, a terrible, soul-shaking disease." But she added that the experience of being treated at MSKCC "has taught [the graduates] real compassion and real strength along with the awe-inspiring power of our common humanity."

Next to speak was Dr. Richard J. O'Reilly, Chair of the Department of Pediatrics, who gave the keynote address. Using, as Dr. O'Reilly put it, words that might appear on an SAT such as "undaunted" and "perseverance," he spoke about the dedication the students had demonstrated in pursuing their studies while facing overwhelming odds. In the face of cancer treatment and its side effects, these young men and women



Alyssa Silva gets some help with her corsage from teacher Anne Marie Cicciu.



Dr. Paul Meyers hugs one of his patients as he presents him with a certificate of achievement.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Nelson Mandela



had summoned great courage to graduate from high school, he observed.

Dr. Paul A. Meyers, Vice Chair of Academic Affairs in the Department of Pediatrics, awarded MSKCC Certificates of Achievement to all 42 graduates. Together, they represented 42 schools in eight different states. Principal Mary Maher honored each graduate at the ceremony with a special award from the New York City

Department of Education. The

awards included honors for academic excellence, outstanding citizenship, leadership, and community service.



Katie Robinson, Patient Services Coordinator, read the poem “Ithaka” by C.P. Cavafy, inspiring the graduates on their journeys forward. Closing the ceremony was Dr. Robert E. Wittes, Physician-in-Chief of MSKCC, who professed his awe at the remarkable class in front of him. “Pomp and Circumstance” was cued, and the graduates processed out of the Recreation Center, the first formally recognized MSKCC high school class!



Teacher Mary Ellen Fitzsimons helps Samantha Simon with her graduation cap.

The Afterparty...

As the graduates gathered to take their class photo, the Recreation Center was transformed into an elegant party space. With wait staff in formal attire, graduates and guests were treated to hors d'oeuvres, cupcakes, a chocolate fountain, and more. As people ate, hugs were exchanged among staff and graduates, and reporters from

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

Eleanor Roosevelt



CNN, WABC, WNBC, the New York Post, and the New York Daily News got interviews with some of the graduates and their families.

The speeches at the ceremony, along with the many conversations that followed the event, all revolved around the wonderful accomplishment of completing one's high school studies in the face of cancer. Our 2007 graduates set an example for those students who will follow them—and, in our opinion, a smarter, finer, and more inspiring group cannot not be found anywhere!



Prom...

Pediatrics was all a-glitter once again this year with Prom. Gorgeous gowns. Professional makeup. Sparkling jewelry. Spiffy tuxes. Delicious food. Trendy music. Wild dancing. Yummy cake. Cool prizes. Handsome kings. Beautiful queens. It all added up to lots and lots of FUN! Thanks to the Children's Committee of The Society of MSKCC, Prom 2007 was a total hit. A picture is worth a thousand words, and at this year's Prom we got some photos that speak volumes.



Three generations of a family get ready in the Recreation Center.



Anne Casson, PNP, scopes out the dresses before Prom.



"A good snapshot stops a moment from running away."

Eudora Welty



The Kings and Queens of the 2007 Pediatric Prom.



The Session Assistants looked particularly ravishing.



PDH nurse Jeanette enjoys a moment in the famed Prom Limo.



Teacher Ross Cohen and one of his students looking dapper at Prom.



Documentary...

And the photos from Prom aren't even the half of it. We also created our very own Pediatric Prom documentary that's sure to rock your world. Complete with shots of "Promingdales," interviews with some of Pediatrics' superstars, and glimpses of what future proms may look like, the documentary will keep you glued to your seats. Check it out at <http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/77081.cfm>.

A Special Reunion...

In 1997, Frank Vooren was 18 and working as a painter in Germany. A tall kid with an eager grin, he received a letter in the mail one afternoon saying that a boy in the neighboring village needed a bone marrow transplant. The letter asked people to register to see whether they were a match for the boy. Frank responded to the drive and provided blood samples to the area hospital. By doing so, he entered the bone marrow registry of Germany. While not a match for the little boy, years later he was contacted and told that he was a 9 out of 10 match for a teenage patient in the United States.

Lauren Peyton was diagnosed with Stage III Hodgkin's disease in 2001 and was successfully treated. However, on New Year's Day, 2003, she was found to have myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS), a preleukemic condition of the bone marrow that can occasionally develop after treatment with chemotherapy. The treatment of Lauren's MDS required a bone marrow transplant. As none of her family members were a match, MSKCC began looking for an eligible donor through the National Marrow Donor Program (NMDP) and international registries. Finally, in the summer of 2003, Lauren received Frank's bone marrow, although neither would learn the identity of the other for two more years.

Donor programs are required to protect the privacy of their donors and recipients for a two-year period at which point, with the agreement of both parties, personal contact information may be released. The only thing Lauren knew about her donor was that he was a 24-year-old male. Wanting to

make a connection, she began writing him letters. These were edited and forwarded through the bone marrow registry. She could only address her donor as "Dear Friend," and sign herself, "Love, Your Friend." Frank, eager to get to know Lauren, did the same. They kept in contact in this way until finally, on August 21, 2005, exactly two years after the transplant, Lauren and Frank signed the releases and began speaking on the phone and emailing back and forth every day. They talked about meeting in person, and this past summer Frank visited the United States for the first time.



Lauren and Frank spent their time seeing the sights of New York, including a visit to the United Nations, shopping on Fifth Avenue, and making an emotional visit to MSKCC's Department of Pediatrics. Lauren gave Frank a tour of the department, showing him the places where she received treatment, blood draws, and even her bone marrow transplant. Once Lauren's nurses and doctors learned of this special visitor, a bevy of people surrounded the unique pair. Asked what he thought about the whole experience, Frank replied "New York. It is very great. There's so much color, so many lights. Everything is bigger than in Germany." But even bigger than New York, he said, was how happy he was to have met Lauren and to have saved her life.

Now a happy, healthy 20-year-old nursing student at Fairfield University in Connecticut, Lauren hopes to see Frank again soon, perhaps this time in Germany.

The Writers Workshop...

For this issue of News9, we are including sections of a prose piece by Megan Popkin, one of our 2007 high school graduates and a participant in the Writers Workshop. In it, she contemplates the significance of an Emily Dickinson poem and her cancer diagnosis. Portions of this essay inspired her graduate address at Convocation.

Our Statures Touch the Skies

We were summer kids. With mercury rising, my sister, brother, and I walked barefoot, the asphalt burning our toes red like hot dogs roasting on the rollers of Froze Fruit Stands, seeing who could bear it the longest before diving our feet into the soft dust beneath the oak tree. I always won, the strongest, the oldest, and in our childish eyes, simply the “biggest.”

I never realized what I was doing—I was the only one who mattered, the only being at the universe’s center. This sentiment remained with me years later and into Miss Fabrizio’s 8th grade class. For a poetry presentation I chose Emily Dickinson’s poem 1176: “We never know how high we are/Till we are asked to rise/And then if we are true to plan/Our statures touch the skies/The Heroism we recite/Would be a normal thing/Did not ourselves the Cubits warp/For fear to be a King.” Ms. Fabrizio asked me if I grasped the poem’s central message, and I confidently nodded my head. After all, I knew all there was to know about high stature and the virtues of heroism, the nobility of kingship and success.

Of course I got the A and aced the class, all while leading my softball travel team to the finals. I was the god of my universe, yet with a Grecian hubris, I was bound to fall. Just as high school acceptance letters began flooding through my mail slot, a faulty diagnosis of strep throat turned out to be in fact rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare form of cancer.

I remember the first sessions of radiation and chemotherapy with cinematic clarity—the nurse’s station, the poisonous IV drip, and the little stanzas echoing in my head: “Till we are asked to rise.” The words now stung. This was my challenge, not like those of the asphalt dares but filled with real fear, real pain, and real suffering.

Yet I couldn’t let my illness stop me from attending the championship game. Down by two runs with two outs in the last inning, I experienced panic for the first time in my life. This was a game I had never seen before—from the sidelines I was watching my past play in front of me as the umpire called the balls and strikes. I couldn’t face my past, and I began to walk away from the only real challenge I had ever been given. Yet as I turned away, Dickinson’s words bombarded my brain like paper cannonballs. Here was my chance to be a warrior and fight my fear.

I returned to watch the grand slam that made my team the 2003 league champions, an auspicious omen that aided me during the darkest recesses of my sickness. In remission for two years now, I still remember the championship game when life’s challenges loom over me, and I try to touch the sky.



We Asked The Experts...

and here are the
**Top 10 Reasons
why Pediatrics is
Extraordinary...**

10 "Prom was incredible. It's a chance for these kids to remember that they're just kids—that they can still have fun no matter what." – Parent

9 "I've taken care of the graduates, heard them talk about graduation for years, and when they went on stage to accept their diplomas, I felt like they were my own kids going up there." – Nursing Assistant

8 "The staff in Pediatrics makes every day in the hospital a little easier for us. Their extra effort, the energy they put into everything they do makes a difference." – Parent

7 "The punch at prom was fantastic—very grownup and sophisticated, but not too grownup and sophisticated ... if you know what I mean." – Teen

6 "Dr O'Reilly used words like 'fortitudinous' and 'sagacious' and some 'P' word that means understanding. I don't know how smart I am if I don't know it, can't spell it, and have no idea how to pronounce it." – Graduate

5 "Hey! What party is Peds putting on next week?!?" – Patient

4 "I'm going to find out more about the National Marrow Donor Program. I think I'm going to register for it." – Parent

3 It was fun to see my mom and grandma dressed up for prom. Too bad they weren't named prom queens." – Teen

2 "Me and Lauren. We now share DNA. I tell her mother we are twins! She always laughs at that!" – Frank Vooren, Lauren Peyton's bone marrow donor

1 "I think my date had a couple of other dates at the prom. That's sooo Dr. Bould." – Patient



An Extra-Big Thank You...

To all the great people, committees, staff members, volunteers, and donors who worked to make our Pediatric Convocation and Prom extra-special. Through their generosity we dreamt big, and those dreams came true. Thank you to The Children's and Associates Committees of The Society of MSKCC; The Society of MSKCC's Kids Kick In Committee; Polly Blitzer; Juliana Thomas Photography; Party King's MC Dana and his spectacular crew of DJs and dancers; the New York City Department of Education, including Chancellor Joel Klein, District 75 Superintendent Bonnie Brown, our wonderful school-

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