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Shoreham-Wading River students use Valentine's Day to show love for sick classmate

By [Samantha Brix](#) | February 14, 2011 in [Education](#), [Featured Stories](#)

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SAMANTHA BRIX PHOTO | Students at Shoreham-Wading River showed their support Monday for Kaitlyn Suarez, a classmate battling Hodgkin's lymphoma for the third time.

Kaitlyn Suarez is battling Hodgkin's lymphoma for the third time, and she's only 18 years old.

A senior at Shoreham-Wading River High School, Kaitlyn was first diagnosed at age 15 and has undergone round after round of chemotherapy.

She found out the cancer came back in November.

"It was pretty heartbreaking," she said. "It was like, 'I don't believe this is actually happening.'"

Kaitlyn completed her most recent chemotherapy treatment last Monday and will receive a bone marrow transplant in March. She said one of the hardest parts about being sick is missing school, but she gets through grueling treatments by "knowing that what you're sacrificing now is going to be worth it in the end."

She also perseveres through hard times with the support of her classmates, who pulled together last week to raise money for her medical expenses.

The Natural Helpers, an extracurricular group of students who offer emotional support to their peers, organized a week-long fundraiser that culminated with the "Turn Valentine's Day Purple" event on Monday.

All of last week, the Natural Helpers sold purple T-shirts — purple being the color of Hodgkin's Lymphoma awareness. A senior student knitted more than thirty purple scarves and donated them for the sale.

On Valentine's Day, instead of wearing red and pink to school, students wore purple T-shirts with a scoreboard graphic reading, "Kait: 3, Cancer: 0." They also donned purple accessories.

Students purchased and filled out heart-shaped messages to be delivered to Kaitlyn and teachers and administrators bought lavender roses by the dozen to bring home to their spouses.

When Kaitlyn, who hasn't been able to attend school, visited her friends and classmates Monday morning, she was awe-struck by the number of people wearing purple.

"Whether they know me personally or not, everyone shows their support," she said. "It's amazing. It's so comforting."

Mary Mitchell, faculty advisor for the Natural Helpers, said the club raised about \$6,500.

This year's event wasn't the first time the high school rallied in support of Ms. Suarez. Last year, the school ran a "Fight for Kait Night" fundraiser, which raised \$10,000. Ms. Mitchell said Natural Helpers members were eager to run that event again, but Kaitlyn asked that the school run a scaled-back event that requires less work.

Kaitlyn said she's grateful to have the support of her classmates, Ms. Mitchell and Senior Class Advisor Lucille McKee, who pitched the "Turn Valentine's Day Purple" event to the Natural Helpers.

Kaitlyn hopes to go on to Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., next year and major in environmental science.

Ms. Mitchell said she's inspired by her student's outlook.

"She is so positive and so driven," Ms. Mitchell said. "She wants to go to college and says this isn't going to hold her down.

"She's the most amazing, outspoken, mature, strong, optimistic person. I've never met anyone like her."

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