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## 'It makes me feel like a regular person': Chronically ill teens get special prom

A children's hospital transformed into a dance party on Saturday night, giving New York City teens whose chronic illness might have prevented them from experiencing the rite of passage a night to remember.



Teens dance the night away at a prom hosted by The Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

*Amy Drucker*

About 75 teens attended the May 9 event, hosted by The Children's Hospital at Montefiore, where they were joined by "Orange is the New Black" star Selenis Leyva, who plays matriarch Gloria Mendoza **on the Emmy-nominated Netflix series**.

The event in the Bronx was a homecoming of sorts for the actress and one of her younger brothers, two-time cancer survivor Arnol, who received treatment at the facility as a 3-year-old with non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

"These children go through so much, and their families [do, too]," Leyva told TODAY.com. "There are very few moments of having fun and just relaxing and just living, and laughter, and having a moment when they feel good about themselves. This prom is a celebration for them."



Gavin Thomas

"Orange is the New Black" star Selenis Leyva meets 18-year-old student Essence White before both attend a May 9 prom for chronically ill patients at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore in New York City.

In addition to local donations covering everything from formal wear to decorations, Leyva's own makeup artist, Tina Costello, provided her services for free to help some of the girls get glam before their big night.

Lindsay Davis, a child-life specialist at Montefiore, helped launch the annual event six years ago for young patients, whose conditions range from cardiac problems and diabetes to cancer and blood disorders. She noted that, because young patients don't often have the chance to socialize with other teens, a prom can serve as more than a chance to let loose.



*Gavin Thomas*

Teens get ready for the prom at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

"If they roll up in there and they don't have any hair, or if they're in a wheelchair, or if they look different, no one there is going to say anything to them, judge them or make fun of them," Davis added. "It's a safe space for them."

Like many traditional proms, Montefiore's event has been theme-oriented since its launch, incorporating elements of Hollywood, a masquerade, the beach, Paris, a carnival, and a black-and-white ball over the past six years. And a random drawing determines a Prom Prince and Princess for kids 12 to 16, and a Prom Queen and King for older patients.



*Amy Drucker*

Sasha Arias, who was named the 2014 Prom Princess at the prom for The Children's Hospital at Montefiore, returned with a guest for this year's event.

Last year's Prom Princess, Sasha Arias, is a 15-year-old student at Academy of Mount St. Ursula in the Bronx. The sickle-cell anemia patient said while she keeps in touch with her friends from school, the hospital's prom gives her another chance to be social while dealing with her condition.

"I do have friends in school, but I was excited to know that there were going to be people [at the prom] who share the same experiences with me," she said. "I was going to have fun with the people who take care of me, like the nurses were going to be there. We were going to bond. I was excited about that."

Davis said the dance has delivered more than a few memorable moments through the years. Arriving in wheelchairs, a boy and a girl — who hadn't known each other at the start of the night — held hands and kissed after the boy asked his brother to lift him out of his chair, Davis recalled. Even older guests revel in

the spectacle of the event. "The first year, we had a dialysis patient who was 20 [when he was named Prom King], and came into dialysis [the following] Monday, wearing his crown," she added.



*Amy Drucker*

"Orange is the New Black" star Selenis Leyva and her daughter, Alina, attend the prom for chronically ill teens at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

Leyva, whose brother also beat thyroid cancer in his late teens, said she was "giddy" about the prom and its significance. As an ambassador for [Gabrielle's Angel Foundation](#), which benefits cancer research, she said she feels an obligation to give back after what Montefiore did for her brother.

"This is a bigger red carpet for me than any major event I have had thus far," she added. "You realize that all your little problems in life mean absolutely nothing when someone is fighting for their life."



Amy Drucker

Essence White attends the May 9 prom hosted by The Children's Hospital at Montefiore.

For patients like 18-year-old Essence White, who often has been confined to a hospital room since Jan. 15 — when she was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia — Leyva's appearance made the event even more spectacular.

"I was completely star-struck," said White, who has acting aspirations of her own. "I love that show, but I never knew that I would meet somebody from there. ... She has a lot of things to do, so the fact that she took some personal time to head over here and talk to us was really great, nice of her and thoughtful."



*Gavin Thomas*

Selenis Levya, her daughter Alina, Arnol Levya, and Montefiore Hospital's Meghan Kelly attend the May 9 event.

White still has three months of treatment ahead, and might not be able to attend her high school prom at Theatre Arts Production Company School in the Bronx. But she said she had a blast hanging out with her fellow prom-goers at Montefiore.

"Being able to cope with this has been very hard," she added. "I'm happy that I've got a chance to have fun, and have a prom, and be able to not be stuck in my room, and have some fun, and meet people. I forgot my situation for a while. It makes me feel like a regular person."

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