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Willingboro High School senior honored for sickle cell advocacy

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer Feb 17, 2017



WILLINGBORO — Ayoola Ogunyimika has spent her whole life living with sickle cell disease.

The inherited blood disorder often can make the typically energetic and ambitious high school senior dehydrated, feel weak or, if she's feeling extra stressed, have a "sickle cell episode," in which her limbs have gone weak and she's had to leave school.

Over the past few years, however, Ayoola has worked to make sure her diagnosis does not hold her back.

"Even though I have sickle cell, it does not define who I am as a person," said Ayoola, 17.

She's used her experience to become an advocate for teaching others about a disease many do not know about.

Ayoola served as teen ambassador for three years from 2013 to 2016 for the Sickle Cell Association of New Jersey, where she spoke at conferences, held fundraisers and events, and educated others about the disease and its effects.

She also works to raise awareness at her school, since she said many people don't understand what sickle cell is.

Ayoola recalled one time in middle school when she got a bloody nose at an assembly and had to walk past a few rows of students to get to the bathroom. Many students started moving aside, telling her they didn't want to "get it on them" for fear of "catching sickle cell," she said.

Ayoola has sold T-shirts and bracelets to classmates to raise awareness about the disease, even after she was no longer the official teen ambassador. She's also taken part in the "24 Seven Line Dance Marathon," which is a 24/7 event that raises money and awareness for sickle cell disease and to promote research for a cure. In total, Ayoola has volunteered for over 300 hours with the organization.

She recently was honored for her work with a \$1,000 scholarship from the Comcast Leaders and Achievers Scholarship program, which recognizes high school seniors for their community service, academics and leadership. Only one student per school can be nominated.

She also received the Dr. Charles F. Whitten Award from the association for her advocacy work.

The Willingboro Board of Education recognized Ayoola's work at its meeting on Feb. 6, with a resolution from Superintendent Ronald Taylor.

"You are truly an ambassador for Willingboro High School," board member Kimbrali Davis said at the meeting.

Despite the recognition, Ayoola said she's not done with her work.

"This year, I really wanted to leave with a 'boom,'" she said.

She's working to put together a walk to raise awareness in the community about the disease.

While she hasn't officially decided on a college, Ayoola said she wants to continue her work with sickle cell and study to become a hematologist.

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What is sickle cell disease?

According to the Sickle Cell Association of New Jersey, "sickle cell is an inherited blood disorder affecting the red blood cells. People with sickle cell disease have red blood cells that become hard and pointed instead of soft and round. Sickle cells cause anemia, pain and many other serious health problems."

The disease primarily affects those of African descent, but it is also present in those of Portuguese, Spanish, French Corsicans, Sardinians, Sicilians, mainland Italians, Greeks, Turks and those from Middle Eastern descent. An estimated 80,000 American people live with the disease.

SCANJ said there is hope for a cure through bone marrow transplants.

For more information, please go to www.sicklecellnewjersey.org.

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