

# The Belle of the Prom

For Cacsmy Brutus, a 17-year-old patient at NYU's Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, it wasn't just a rough day, but a rough year.

Several months earlier, in the spring of 2006, osteosarcoma (the most common malignant bone tumor in children and adolescents) had forced her to undergo a hemipelvectomy. The procedure, so rare that it represents only 1 percent of all amputations performed in the U.S., entailed the removal of her right leg, hip joint, and half of her pelvis. With no bony tissue intact to act as a lever—that is, with no functioning hip to activate a prosthesis—Cacsmy faced one of the biggest rehab challenges there is.

Both Cacsmy and her caregivers at Rusk rose to the challenge, in ways neither could have imagined. Much of her therapy involves gait training, with the long-term goal of enabling her to walk with a prosthesis and a single straight cane, thereby freeing up one hand for functional tasks. The work is grueling. "It's extremely difficult to use this kind of prosthesis," explains Cacsmy's physiatrist, Joan T. Gold, M.D., Clinical Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine. "It requires agility and a large expenditure of energy."

Through it all, Cacsmy—a six-foot-tall former runner who looks more like a model than an athlete—remains strong and stoic. When she was an inpatient at Rusk, the younger children gravitated to her. Drawn by her radiance, humility, and smile, they would see her and cry out: "Cacsmy! Cacsmy!"

"I've never met anyone like her," says Cacsmy's physical therapist, Andrea Cross. "She has this strength of character that is extraordinary." Dr. Gold says simply: "She teaches us."

But on one particular day, Cacsmy's frustration bubbled to the surface. "I just want to go to my prom," she confided. "At



Physical therapist Andrea Cross and her patient, Cacsmy Brutus



that point," says Cross, "I stopped being a clinician and became a big sister. I wanted to do everything I could to make her prom special."

Springing into action, Cross contacted Planet Hope, a foundation created by

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actress Sharon Stone and her sister, Kelly, which outfits needy teens with prom attire. They responded with a commitment to furnish a designer dress for the occasion. Then Cross called Lavar Hair Designs, a salon on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which agreed to do her up right with a full hair weave, styling, and makeup. As a finishing touch, Cross secured the donation of a wrist corsage from Starbright Floral Designs in Chelsea.

The day before the big event in May at Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn, Cacsmy, who hails from Haiti, was discharged from the hospital. With the help of her friends at Rusk, she not only went to the prom, but went in style. Andrea Cross keeps a card from Cacsmy on her desk. It reads: "Thank you for making my dream come true."

This fall Cacsmy enrolls at Brooklyn College. Before her illness she had planned to study fashion design, but now she hopes to become a psychologist. "When I was in the hospital," she says, "I kept thinking about those kids with so many physical problems. Some of them were so little. So I thought, 'I want to help them.' And that's what I'll do." ●



The complex prosthesis made for Cacsmy was pioneered at Rusk some years ago, though she opted not to wear it with her prom dress.