

SICKLE CELL AWARENESS MONTH

Confronting the disease

By **Karl B. Hille**
Examiner Staff Writer

Samantha Cohen, 8, has big ambitions, and she isn't going to let a genetic blood condition keep her down.

"I want to be president, and I want to become a doctor, and that's pretty much it," she said. "Oh, and I want to become an actor, but that's it."

Sickle cell anemia doesn't bother her, she said with an 8-year-old's bravado.

What the third-grader at Roland Park Country School means is she has learned to cope with the stomach pain, headaches, transfusions, exhaustion and recently a potentially dangerous stroke.

Nearly four weeks after the stroke, you wouldn't know it from talking to her, though her mother, Kelleye Cohen, said Sammie is not allowed to participate in sports for several weeks until she fully recovers.

She is one of the estimated 70,000 Americans suffering from sickle cell disease — marked by abnormally shaped red blood cells and anemia, according to the Sickle Cell Disease Association of America.

With 1,000 new cases diagnosed

every year, it is one of the most common genetic disorders.

It is also one of the least understood.

That's why Sammie decided to turn educating her friends and classmates into a community service project for her school.

"We sat all my friends down and talked about it and answered their questions," she said.

Then they made baskets with nail polish, drawing paper and crayons and pens and pencils to give to children in the hospital for transfusions.

"When you go for a simple transfusion, you get to pick out of the 'treasure box,'" she said. "It's pretty cool."

Developing those essential fundraising and leadership skills she'll need to be president, Sammie participates in Red Cross blood-drive appeals and created a nonprofit to raise the spirits of other children with sickle cell.

Right now she raises money for The Samantha Cohen Foundation by selling dolls her mother makes.

"We want to use the money to help decorate (children's) rooms for when they come home from the hospital," she said. "Painting their rooms and stuff like that."

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SUPPORTING SICKLE CELL PATIENTS:

September is National Sickle Cell Awareness Month, and the Baltimore-based William E. Proudfoot Sickle Cell Fund will hold its second annual fundraiser tonight. Proceeds support sickle cell programs in the mid-Atlantic region.

» **Keynote speaker:** Oprah Winfrey Show regular contributor, "Dr. Robin" Smith

» **Honorees:** Dr. Sophie Lanzkron of the Sickle Cell Center for Adults at Johns Hopkins and Nurse Jean R. Wadman, with the Sickle Cell Program at the Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Philadelphia

IF YOU GO

- » **When:** 6 tonight
- » **Where:** Renaissance Harborplace Hotel
202 E. Pratt St., Baltimore
- » **Cost:** \$60 per person for the General reception
- » **Contact:** Ms. Kathy Sutton at 410-963-5092
- » **Web site:** www.wepsicklecell.org



Samantha Cohen, 8, with her mother, Kelleye, at her side, talks about how she copes with sickle cell anemia. - Chris Ammann/Examiner

Suffering in silence

People with sickle cell disease often suffer in silence, despite having one of the most common genetic disorders in America.

The disease occurs when someone is born with two sickle cell trait genes, one from each parent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hemoglobin inside the red blood cells — which carries oxygen to the body — forms long strands that distort the shape of the cell into a banana shape. These cells

can catch in tiny blood vessels and block blood flow.

For the most part, patients are recommended to maintain a healthy diet and drink plenty of fluids, according to the CDC. In some cases, frequent blood transfusions are necessary to prevent strokes and revitalize the blood.

Influenza, fevers, some decongestants and extremes of stress, heat and cold can strain the body and lead to blocked blood flow.

- Karl B. Hille



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