Comeback champion tells kids: Never give up

BY DENNIS MCCARTHY, Columnist
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The comeback kid paused and gave the question some serious thought before answering. This was too important to rush.

"What I want to say to people is they should not give up on kids they think can't make it," Kristina Lopez said. "Kids like me.

"I've been driven by people telling me what I couldn't do, that I was too sick, and my life was set. It wasn't set. Being sick was not who I wanted to be. This is."

California State University, Northridge, had just awarded 24-year-old Kristina a master's degree with distinction in general experimental psychology. Still in her cap and gown Thursday morning, she knelt down and gave hugs to the kids in her special-education class at Sylmar Elementary School.

She'll be leaving the kids soon to begin work on her doctorate degree in autism and communication disorders in a five-year program at the University of Michigan.

These kids, ages 9 and 10, will be in high school when Kristina comes home again to the San Fernando Valley to work with families who have children with autism.

But let's hope they'll remember what their special-ed teacher's aide taught them this year: Never give up or sell yourself short. Never let anyone write you off because you're sick.

The comeback kid didn't.

If you've been reading this column for a while, you might remember Kristina. She was 16 back in 1998 when she had to drop out of St. Genevieve High School in Panorama City because her epileptic seizures were coming more frequently.

She didn't want her fellow cheerleaders and friends to see her like that.

Reluctantly, the honor-roll student started home schooling while she waited for the brain surgeries that she hoped would make her head all right again.

Her fellow cheerleaders didn't forget her. They invited her back to cheer with them at the homecoming game, but school officials nixed it because only enrolled students could be on the sidelines.

So Kristina sat in the stands with her parents in her cheer uniform that night, coming down to the sidelines briefly during halftime at the beckoning of the other cheerleaders.

For that, she was kicked off the field by school administrators who accused her of disobeying their decision.

It was a wrong, cold-hearted decision that had Kristina running from the sidelines crying. When her mom and dad found her, she was sitting under the bleachers sobbing.

"What did I do, except get sick?" she asked them.

It made her a stronger person that night, Kristina said. Made her realize that life isn't always fair.

A few months later, she had her right temporal lobe removed in a four-hour procedure that all hoped would end her seizures.

It did, for a few years. She graduated from Granada Hills High School, but the seizures returned while she was taking classes at CSUN in child psychology and working, as a teacher's assistant, with special-education kids.

A second operation was needed, but there were no guarantees, she was told.
The second operation worked, and the comeback kid walked down the aisle this week to pick up her master's, on her way to a doctorate.

Sylmar Elementary Principal Yolanda Guerra asked Kristina to give a shot of motivation to the 1,000 students at her school last week.

The comeback kid said sure. She talked about those dark days and showed pictures of herself with her head shaved, showing long scars that run across her scalp.

"It's OK, I'm fine now," she said. "But this is why you should never give up, never quit school. Don't let anyone tell you you can't be what you want to be."

Dennis McCarthy’s column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday.

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