

Unprotected People #3

Hepatitis B

Family remembers hepatitis B victim as a girl with promise

By Molly Guthrey, staff writer, St. Paul Pioneer Press. Originally printed Saturday, Aug. 6, 1994. Reprinted with permission.

The family huddled quietly on the eve of their child's funeral in a home cloaked with almost tangible sorrow.

The North Minneapolis house used to be filled with 15-year-old Arkesha Johnson's easy peals of laughter. But on Thursday, it was painfully silent with grief-stricken relatives.

Terry Johnson, the girl's mother, sat at the kitchen table, her shoulders hunched as she talked about her daughter's sudden death from hepatitis B. She spoke softly and her eyes still had a glaze of shock about them, as if her mind was still trying to process her eldest daughter's death six days earlier.

Known to friends and family as Kesha, she was an honors student who excelled at math and science and who would have been a junior this fall at South High School in Minneapolis. She had a boyfriend and a best friend. She loved Janet Jackson and rap music and gospel music, too. She dreamed of becoming a surgeon or a pediatrician and planned to attend college—maybe Temple University—on grants and scholarships.

She was determined to be a success in life. Renee Johnson, one of her aunts, was so sure of her niece's academic talents that she was convinced that someday she would watch as Kesha was awarded the Nobel Prize after discovering a cure for cancer or AIDS.

Now, the family is trying to cope with the death of all those dreams surrounding their Kesha.

"I think any time you lose a child, you feel shock, hurt and pain, everything pretty negative rolled up into one," Renee Johnson said.

Kesha died on July 29 of hepatitis B, family members said, after being diagnosed about two weeks before. Until then, she had been a seemingly healthy and active teenager—but then she started having stomach pains. She was nauseated and throwing up on July 14, the day her mother took her to the Hennepin County Medical Center.

The doctors ran some tests and found her liver badly damaged, family members said. They wouldn't let Kesha go home again, even to pack. She was transferred to the University of Minnesota Hospital, where her illness quickly worsened as family members tried to assimilate what was happening.

She never went home again.

She was removed from life support on July 29 as about 40 family members and close friends filled the room and cried. Only her aunt could bear to watch as Kesha stopped breathing. Some left the room, sobbing.

"I knew Kesha's spirit had already left us," said Renee Johnson.

She was the same Kesha they loved for the first nine days in the hospital, before the disease overtook her body and her mind. She giggled and watched television, visited with friends and family and hoped for the best.

None of them thought she would die. Family members said she was put at the top of a transplant list.

"There was always hope," said Kim Johnson, an aunt from Chicago. "We didn't think it would happen like this. The doctors had hoped it wouldn't. It was just so sudden."

There were so many relatives visiting that they filled up two waiting rooms. The operators at the university received hundreds of calls from well-wishers.

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Family members said they have been told by doctors that it is rare for a person to be overcome so quickly by hepatitis. They're not sure how she caught the disease or why it happened so fast.

Hepatitis B is a highly infectious virus that attacks the liver. Infection can lead to severe illness, liver damage and sometimes death. Nationally, about 300,000 acute cases and 6,500 deaths occur annually, health officials say.

Last year in Minnesota, there were 77 cases of hepatitis B reported in Minnesota, 56 cases involving people aged 15 to 39. The infection has slowly been declining in Minnesota since 1988. Deaths are rare, health officials said.

"It is often a silent disease," said Dr. Deborah Wexler, of the St. Paul-based Hepatitis B Coalition. "This is a perfect example of why every child in the United States needs to be vaccinated against hepatitis B."

Last year, Minnesota became the first state in the nation to recommend that all adolescents be immunized against the hepatitis B virus. State health officials took the step after they discovered the disease

was becoming more prevalent among adolescents 15 and older.

At her funeral on Friday at St. John's Missionary Baptist Church on Morgan Avenue, Kesha looked a little bit like an angel in her casket, dressed in a cream dress with sparkly rhinestones sprinkled across her chest, resting in a bed of white velvet.

It was a girlish casket, brown with tiny pink flowers etched onto the sides.

It was a simple service, filled with simple words and songs and prayers. The choir she used to sing with sang for her. Her friend Cornell Washington also sang a song about their friendship, a cappella. He bowed his head to compose himself for minutes before he began.

"You never miss a good friend until she's gone," the boy sang in a shaky voice from the front of the church. "Life goes on, but it's not the same."

And her family and friends bowed their heads and began sobbing openly as the boy's song for Kesha filled the small church.