

Now, the event lasts a month and involves scores of activities. The track team gets sponsors for a 24-hour run. There are videogame, chess and mah-jongg tournaments. A student shaved his head for donations; another made omelets in the hallway. The fund-raising drive will end March 20, when the committee will announce how much money the school has raised.

To qualify for money, charities must focus on children, have a local connection and be small enough that the students' fund raising will significantly boost research budgets. Last fall, student-senate members and the three student leaders pored over the applications and summoned seven semifinalists for an interview.

Semifinalists Interviews

One candidate was Amy Herzog. She and Brian have a 6-year-old son, Noah, who was diagnosed in May with a painful allergic disorder called eosinophilic esophagitis, or EE. The Herzogs, who met each other when they were students at the high school, were representing a charity called Cured, or Campaign Urging Research for Eosinophilic Disease.

Between bites of lunch, the students asked for an explanation of EE. It's an allergic disease, Ms. Herzog said, in which white blood cells attack the digestive system, misjudging the protein in food as a parasite. Noah has been on a number of medications and had a severely restricted diet. Many children with EE have to ingest an amino-acid formula through a feeding tube in order to get their nutrition.

The students asked: How is your day-to-day life? A struggle, the Herzogs said. They keep Noah's favorite foods -- pizza and ice cream -- out of the house. For his birthday party last August, his birthday "cake" was a block of lemon sorbet with chocolate syrup poured over it.

How would the money be used? In addition to seeking a cure, Ms. Herzog said, researchers are looking for easier ways to track the disease than the frequent esophageal biopsies some patients now must endure.

In November, the three leaders and other students met to discuss the semifinalists. One candidate, Friends United for Juvenile Diabetes Research, had indicated that the school's funds might be matched by a donor.

"Matching is a big factor why Huntington's was picked" last year, said Shana Sternberg, a 16-year-old junior. "I know it's not supposed to be about money, but unfortunately sometimes that's how it goes."

Ali Pollack, another of the three leaders, wrote a college-application essay on the charity drive and says it is her passion. When Cured came up, the 17-year-old senior said the disease "might not be so prevalent, but it's where the money could make a big difference."

Katie Wynbrandt, the third leader, concurred. Cured was "by far my favorite," the 18-year-old senior said. "We're teaching kids something new."

A few days after the meeting, the senate chose Cured, Friends United, and Hope for All, which funds autism awareness, as its three finalists.

Jumping Into Action

Erin Doppelt, a 16-year-old junior, jumped into action. A neighbor of the Herzogs', she nominated Cured for the charity drive. She lobbied students in the cafeteria, sent Facebook messages and put up posters with Noah's picture. "I got on people's nerves," she says. "They were like, 'Erin, you've become obsessive, you're going crazy.'"

On the day of the vote in December, Erin was distressed to see so many students voting for the diabetes charity. She skipped lunch and went home feeling dispirited. Down the street, Ms. Herzog sat numbly in front of the television, convinced that the better-known illnesses would get more votes.

Shortly after 4 p.m., the phone rang. Ms. Herzog saw the caller ID: Highland Park High School. Shana and Ali were on speakerphone.

"The voting is over," Shana said. "We have the results." Ms. Herzog says she had trouble breathing.

Charity Kick Off

Shana went on, "And we're so happy to tell you that Cured won!" Ms. Herzog began to cry. Now, Highland Park is holding its annual fund-raising drive, which will determine how much Cured receives.

An assembly on Feb. 5 kicked off the charity drive. Elyn Kodroff, who founded Cured four years ago, introduced her daughter, Jori, and a grinning 11-year-old, Daniel Bunning, who both have EE, for what organizers called the "reach into your pockets" moment.

Daniel demonstrated pouring formula into a feeding tube, similar to the one implanted in his abdomen.

"I have to do 12 ounces of this, seven times a day," he said. "But that could change because of all of you. You guys could make a difference. You guys can raise money, and you guys can find a cure." The students cheered.

Impressed by the assembly, a member of the audience who asked to remain anonymous offered to match the students' funds, up to \$250,000. With that pledge, the school could raise half a million dollars this year.

The silent auction, the largest event, probably earned \$25,000. The track team raised about \$12,000 for its 24-hour run. During ice-skating night, one girl earned \$30 for standing on the ice in her bare feet for three minutes. The grand total will be closely guarded until the closing assembly later this month.

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