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Disabling lupus is no match for determined 'hope of the 'hood'

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BY CASSANDRA SPRATLING
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Instead of getting up and going to school, there were lots of days of getting up and going to the doctor.

Another appointment.

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Another test.

Another treatment for Juatia (why-TEE-ah) Samuel.

After the doctor visits, if the pain wasn't too much, she'd catch what classes she could before the school day ended.

One semester, Juatia missed 36 days of school because of complications from lupus, a chronic disorder in which the body's immune system goes out of whack and causes inflammation of the joints, pain and other problems.

Juatia, 17, was diagnosed 2 1/2 years ago.

Despite all that, Juatia has earned a 3.95 grade point average and is due to graduate in June from Detroit's Cass Technical High School, where she's vice president of the class of 2007. She's

also earned a scholarship to the University of Michigan, where she plans to study biomedical engineering. And the U-M is just one of several prestigious universities that want her.

Juatia credits her family -- especially her 73-year-old grandmother, Allie Pearl Samuel, who helped raise her -- and a determination to excel with keeping her going.

"I've always wanted to do well," Juatia says. "I just wanted to always try my best. Sometimes, I think of myself as the hope of the 'hood.'"

She laughs when she says that. But she excelled despite growing up in a deteriorating Detroit neighborhood filled with vacant, litter-filled lots, and a debilitating illness that began the summer before 10th grade.

Juatia was enrolled in a summer pre-engineering program at the University of Detroit Mercy when she first saw signs that something wasn't quite right.

One morning after showering in the dormitory where she was staying, she noticed a rash all over her upper body.

"It looked really scary," she recalls. "I thought either I was allergic to something or the shower was really filthy."

When the rash didn't disappear when she returned home a few days later, her mother, Erika Samuel, took her to the doctor.

That began the first of several trips to hospitals and specialists to determine the source of the worsening problem.

Juatia began losing her hair, feeling tired all the time, and aching.

Her problems didn't end after doctors determined that she had lupus. Medication, including steroids, caused her to

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(RASHAUN RUCKER/Detroit Free Press)

Juatia Samuel credits her grandmother, Allie Pearl Samuel, who always stressed the importance of education, with some of her success.

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gain weight, and pain would flair up without warning.

It was bad enough that she was sick and tired a lot; now she had to explain to friends why she was suddenly getting fat.

Still, Juatia remained determined to excel.

A visit to the two-family flat she and her mom share with her grandmother and other family members -- including a 15-year-old brother, Ricardo -- helps to explain.

A row of high school graduation portraits of each of her grandmother's 10 children, including three who graduated college, dominates the dining room.

Grandma Allie, the daughter of sharecroppers, always insisted her children earn an education.

"I have to keep my granny happy," Juatia says. "She was born poor in Evergreen, Ala. But she raised 10 children and all of them turned out well. She used to tell me all the time about how they had to pick cotton and work hard for whites, just to make a few cents. They didn't have much, but they had each other. They made it and so can I.

"My grandmother's always telling me to pray and put God first," she says. "When I do well she always praises me, and that makes me happy."

Aunts and uncles also serve as a network of support and guidance.

"I know if I need something, anything, if I can't get it from my mom or dad, I can depend on one of my aunts or uncles," says Juatia.

"She's just the kind of child who won't give up," says aunt Angelia Samuel, 38. "She's always been like that. We knew she was going to be something when she took off and started walking at 8 months."

Her mother, Erika Samuel, 35, a Comerica Bank administrator, believes another factor that contributes to Juatia's success is her love of reading, nurtured by teachers since elementary school.

"We'll be trying to get out of the house to go somewhere, and we have to wait on her while she says, 'Hold on; let me finish this chapter.'

Juatia counts among her favorite books "Jubilee," "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and the Bible. She's also a major Harry Potter fan.

In addition to reading, she enjoys drawing, graphic arts and fashion design. She's sings, mimes and is a praise dancer at Beulah First Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit.

Juatia says she's looking forward to graduation. "I just want to make my mark on the world," she says.

Contact **CASSANDRA SPRATLING** at 313-223-4580 or cspratling@freepress.com.

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