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GUY C. PEIFER/Photo provided

Brianna Barker, 15, left, and her mom Veronica, center, meet Shannon Ruiz. Brianna received Shannon's deceased daughter's heart in a transplant.

From tragedy, another life renewed

Teen's heart helps another girl thrive

BY MICHAEL NOVINSON
Times Herald-Record

TOWN OF WALLKILL — Just one thought filled the minds of the two mothers as they at last laid eyes upon one another in the Hampton Inn lobby: Don't cry.

The meeting between Washingtonville's Veronica Barker and Shannon Rouse Ruiz of North Carolina was months in the making — the inevitable outcome of conversations forged by an unbreakable bond.

Shannon lost her teen daughter Kaitlyn to a prescription drug overdose two years ago.

By allowing Kaitlyn's heart to be donated, she saved the life of Veronica's daughter, Bri-

anna, who passed out and went into cardiac arrest following a June 2011 school dance, when she was 13.

Thoughts of life and loss, of grief and giving, overwhelmed the mothers when they met Thursday. But, keeping their word to their children and themselves, no tears were shed.

"I was crying on the inside," Veronica admits.

The first thing Shannon did was marvel at Brianna's eyes. They were the exact same shade of hazel at Kaitlyn's.

She also marvelled at Brianna's bubbly, talkative demeanor. That, too, reminded her of Kaitlyn; Veronica said Brianna

had been shy prior to the transplant surgery, having suffered from many years of heart-muscle deterioration.

"It felt like she was already a really close friend of ours," said Shannon's daughter Lexi Ruiz, 13. Lexi, with her brother Christian Ruiz, 15, joined Shannon in New York for the weekend.

The two families swapped stories about Kaitlyn and Brianna over a meal and a round of mini golf at The Castle, trying to find all the similarities.

They'll also come together with friends and family, nearly 60 strong, Saturday at Chadwick Lake Park in the Town of Newburgh.

They'll be part of Team Kaitlyn at the Lap 4 Life, which rais-

es money for the New York Organ Donor Network.

Brianna, now 15, has made a dramatic recovery since the operation.

Her blood is now tested just four times per year, a far cry from the thrice-weekly tests immediately after the surgery.

Veronica no longer has to worry about health risks if Brianna exerts herself on a hike or at a school dance.

From more energy for daily tasks to finally being able to ride roller coasters, Brianna said the new heart has given her a new start on life.

"I feel healthier," Brianna said. "I feel like I can do whatever I want now."

mnovinson@th-record.com