

Helping save lives in her sister's name

■ Woman whose twin died of heart ailment gets award for area school defibrillator effort

By DALE LEZON
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Kindel VanCronkhite hopes her identical twin sister's death from sudden cardiac arrest will save other people from fatal heart attacks.

The Houston paralegal founded and operates Courtney's Crusade, a nonprofit effort that donates automated external defibrillators to schools. It is named for her sister, Courtney VanCronkhite, who died in August 1999. She hopes it will help keep her sister's memory alive.

So far, the effort has raised about \$80,000 to buy 25 of the life-saving tools for schools in the Katy, Spring Branch and Sheldon school districts. VanCronkhite, 30, expects to donate more to other schools in the coming years.

Her commitment was recognized by "You Make A Difference," a national contest sponsored by Maybelline New York, People magazine and Columbia Records that pays tribute to women for their contributions to their communities.

VanCronkhite was honored earlier this month at a ceremony in Houston. She thinks her sister would have been proud. "I felt I had to carry a torch for her, create a living legacy," she said.

VanCronkhite said she decided to donate the equipment, known as AEDs, to schools after she saw news accounts of student athletes suffering heart ailments during practices and games.

"They were a godsend," said Debbie Pilcher, public relations director for Sheldon Independent School District. "It was the best thing that could have happened to us."

Pilcher said Courtney's Crusade donated eight of the district's 15 AEDs placed in schools and other facilities.

VanCronkhite was born six minutes before her sister Jan. 16, 1975, and the two rarely left each other's side as they grew up. They graduated from Alief Elsik High School in 1993 and attended Lindsey Wilson College in Columbia, Ky., on soccer scholarships. They transferred



BEN DESOTO : CHRONICLE

TRIBUTE: Kindel VanCronkhite, left, celebrates her win in the "You Make A Difference" national contest with her mother, Trisha Maley, in Houston earlier this month. VanCronkhite, a paralegal, operates Courtney's Crusade, a nonprofit effort that donates automated external defibrillators to schools.

LENDING A HAND

To donate and to find more information about Courtney's Crusade, go to www.courtneyscrusade.com.

to the University of West Florida as juniors. Then they transferred to the University of Houston, where they earned bachelor's degrees in technical writing in 1997.

VanCronkhite and her sister were diagnosed with Long QT

syndrome, a rare disorder of the heart's electrical rhythm, a few months before Courtney died.

The disorder can produce rapid, chaotic heartbeats and can lead to fainting and death. Courtney, who worked in general sales for Continental Airlines, died in her sleep.

After her sister's death, VanCronkhite said a tiny cardiac device was implanted in her to shock her heart back into normal rhythm if it beats erratically. She said it has saved her life once.

Her parents, stepsister and older sister, who nominated VanCronkhite for the award, help raise money for Courtney's Crusade. Courtney would have been glad about their effort and that her name was connected to it, her sister said.

"She was outgoing, funny, very genuine, very caring," VanCronkhite said.

"She is someone whose memory you would not want to see die."

dale.lezon@chron.com

TRAFFIC HOT SPOTS



South Loop

5. The westbound entry ramp from Central and the exit ramp to Broadway are closed until 3 p.m.
6. An eastbound frontage road lane from Stella Link to South Main is closed until 5 p.m. Wednesday. A westbound frontage road lane from South Main to Stella Link is closed until 5 p.m. Wednesday.

Spur 527

Northbound spur and entry ramps from Milam and Richmond are closed.

Important numbers

■ Texas Department of Transportation: 713-802-5074
■ Katy Freeway Public Information Office: 281-589-5852
■ Metropolitan Transit Authority: 713-635-4000
■ Harris County Toll Road Authority: 832-601-7800