

Daughter's legacy allows local family to make \$20K donation to SickKids



By Brock Weir

Toronto's Hospital For Sick Children became a second home to the Watkin family.

At the hospital day in and day out as their daughter Sarah received treatment for acute myeloid leukemia, they soon found everything they needed was there as Sarah bravely fought for life.

Tragically, Sarah lost her fight in 2014 but her legacy lives on through community-led and student-led initiatives throughout York Region fighting for a cure.

This past December, the Skate for Sarah fundraiser took place once again, raising a whopping \$20,900 for charity. While the previous year's proceeds went to support kids who couldn't afford to participate in organized sports, this year the family decided to give back to their "second home," and made the emotional presentation to SickKids last week.

"SickKids was not just a home," says Mark, an Aurora resident and teacher at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. "When Sarah was having a bad day, a clown just walked into her room magically and cheered her up. There were days when she had about a 107 fever for a week and you could see the pain in her eyes. SickKids brought in clowns, massage therapists, whoever needed to be with her.

"I remember hours upon hours of me and my wife crying and there was always a nurse to talk to, someone who just cared. We wanted SickKids to put the money towards funding some sort of research and hopefully they can come up with a new drug, a new trial, a new something because right now when you're diagnosed with AML leukemia, your success rate is, at best, 50 per cent and then your odds go down fairly quickly.

"That's what happened to Sarah. We can't save Sarah's life, but maybe we can save someone else's life."

Mark Watkin has been a teacher at Williams for two years. Before he joined the school's faculty, however, he was already a familiar face to many students.

The Dr. G.W. Williams community is one which embraced Sarah and her cause fairly early on, long before her passing.

Students formed "Sarah's Stars" which spearheaded numerous in-school initiatives "and initiatives that spread well beyond Williams' walls" in Sarah's honour, including a "swabbing" drive aimed to get community members registered on the National Bone Marrow registry with a simple cheek swab.

Sarah's passing steeled the students' resolve to make a difference her name and those programs endure to this day.

"Sarah really hit a nerve with so many people," says Mr. Watkin. "When we started posting about her on Facebook, there were about half a million views. As a result, so many people were watching and just wanted to do something. One of the people who approached me asked if he could use our daughter's name for something positive. As long as we can use Sarah's name for something good in this world, why not?"

"You have a child, hope they grow up and so forth, but we entered a world I hope no parent ever enters. When your child has cancer,

everything changes. Everything has forever been changed.?

Sarah's Drive For Hope started off with the simple premise of encouraging people to donate blood. When it became evident Sarah might need a bone marrow transplant, their focus shifted to increasing the ranks of the National Bone Marrow registry as neither of Sarah's parents were matches.

As a teacher, Mark made a few calls and students were soon on board lending their hands ? and their cheeks ? for the cause That started a groundswell and two years ago every high school across the York Region District School Board had swabbing drives. ?I have actually met some of those students who are matches,? says Mark. ?They have been contacted by One Match to say they are a match and can save a life. I know there have been eight matches so far and it is phenomenal to know that even though we weren't able to save Sarah's life, maybe someone else out there can be saved.?

But swabbing drives have slowed down, they are often taking place every other year, but Mr. Watkin is looking to raise that momentum once again.

?I really want to make sure Aurora knows how important and how easy it is to get on the bone marrow registry,? says Mr. Watkin, adding that he wants to arrange a high school swabbing campaign backed by all four high schools in Aurora. ?I think that's what hinders a lot of people, thinking bone marrow and thinking pain, needles and sawing something off you. If more people knew it was really a Q-Tip in the mouth, I think everyone would get on the registry. It just takes a minute of your time and everyone can do this.?