

Be a Hero head-shaving fundraiser returns to benefit Southlake



When Charlotte Wilson was just eight months old, she spent her next eight months in hospital being treated for a rare type of juvenile leukemia.

As she neared the end of her treatment at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, her York Region-based family's relief was tinged with fear as the place that helped their daughter on the road to recovery was so far away from home.

But those fears turned to relief when the family learned of the Paediatric Oncology Clinic just eight minutes from their front door at Southlake Regional Health Centre.

?After our first visit to Southlake's clinic, the fear and anxiety were eased,? says Charlotte's dad, York Regional Police Constable Joe Wilson. ?We immediately noticed the professional and high-quality care offered at the clinic. I truly believe by supporting Southlake's Pediatric Oncology Centre, we're helping to fight childhood cancer in our community.?

This was a feeling shared by Charlotte as well at the York Regional Police's (YRP) Aurora headquarters last Wednesday afternoon when she confidently took the stage and strongly grasped a shaver to take more than just a little off the top of YRP Sergeant Andy Pattenden ? a cancer survivor and Southlake patient himself ? to mark the start of the Be a Hero Campaign.

Back for the first time since the start of the global pandemic, the Be a Hero campaign will see first responders and emergency personnel throughout the community put their glorious manes on the line in the name of fighting childhood cancer in the community.

In the weeks leading up to April 22's Be a Hero event at Newmarket's Upper Canada Mall, participants will collect pledges for the cause, culminating in having their heads shaved by professionals, as well as survivors like Charlotte, with all proceeds benefiting the hospital.

?Our event is to raise money for our friends at Southlake's Pediatric Oncology Centre and that is truly something I am really excited about,? said YRP Deputy Chief Paulo De Silva. ?I'm proud that thanks to the funds raised at our 2019 event we were able to purchase a bell that all children get to ring at the end of their treatment. It was one of our goals to thank everyone and we were able to achieve that goal back in 2019. It warms my heart to hear that sound and I hope that bell is rung numerous times each and every day.

?I know I speak for everyone who shaved their head back in April of 2019 and those who participate this year, that our child ambassadors are truly an inspiration to everyone. Charlotte, you are all of our inspiration. Joe, his wife Michelle, Charlotte and her brother William are part of our first responder family and their battle was our battle. As we all know, it makes the fight of this magnitude just a little bit easier when you can take this fight close to home. That's why after more than 20 years of support [we] decided to jump on the opportunity to champion the work being done at Southlake Hospital in helping young cancer patients receive treatment in their home community. When we heard from YRP members whose own children were battling this terrible disease, and with having Southlake Hospital close to home meant to them, we need no more motivation to start creating participants and donors.?

When the fundraiser was last able to take place in 2019, they raised \$97,000 and they're hoping to exceed that number this year ? a pledge that was music to the ears of Leslie Ring, Senior Vice President of Major Gifts and Campaigns for the Southlake Regional Health Centre Foundation.

?Your hair will come back and imagine the message that you send to children and their families fighting cancer who have lost their hair when they look at their heroes to see that you are there standing in solidarity with them,? said Ring. ?[You're] helping to inspire us to do everything that we can to support the Paediatric Oncology Clinic at Southlake. We are so fortunate to have Southlake in our community and I am proud to say that 1,300 visits happened last year to support patients like Charlotte.

?We're also very lucky because our hospital works in very close partnership with SickKids and the Pediatric Oncology group of Ontario. What that means is it means when a family is focused on fighting cancer, when you're feeling anxious or even a little afraid, they can receive leading-edge cancer care right here at home in their community. They don't have to take on the added stress, the added burden of travelling downtown for care. When children are fighting cancer and have other brothers and sisters that need love and support, and moms and dads are worried about taking time off work and having to support their family being able to receive that care close to home is critically important and events like this help make that happen.?

Since the bell was first installed after the 2019 campaign, Ring says 85 children have been able to ring it to signal the successful completion of their treatment at Southlake.

?The bell is proudly displayed at Southlake and when it rings it is one of our best days,? Ring added. ?When you're in the Centre and you hear that you get goosebumps?because these brave, resilient children have finished their treatment and it means they can go back to the things that are truly important: hockey practice, birthday parties, time with family and friends, and probably getting into trouble with their brothers and sisters!?

For more information on the Be a Hero campaign, including how you can help the cause, visit give.southlake.ca/site/TR?pg=entry&fr_id=1621.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter