

Heart Month highlights community need ? and an opportunity to help



By Brock Weir

?Heart-y's?

That's what nine-year-old Aurora resident Owen Veloso thinks the venerable Canadian hamburger restaurant Harvey's should be called.

It's not a comment on the food itself, but the spirit within its walls at the Yonge and Henderson restaurant as they make a final push to raise \$6,000 for the Heart & Stroke Foundation.

Owen is a familiar face around the restaurant.

Having been born with a congenital heart defect, he has been the ?face? of the restaurant's annual campaign to give the local branch of the foundation a much-needed boost during February's ?Heart Month.?

This year is no exception as Owen, his parents Laura and Brian, and restaurant owner Joe Anselmo, spread the word that for \$2 at the point of purchase, you can buy a paper heart with all money raised going directly back to the Foundation.

?We all have a heart,? says Laura, whose son was not expected to survive the first five months of his life. ?The money that is raised goes towards all sorts of research to help keep everybody's heart healthy. Owen was born with a heart defect, and heart defects are never really cured. There are medications and surgeries but they are never really cured.

?With the more severe heart defects, we're not talking about one operation, we're talking about multiple operations, life-long procedures, and it is specialized cardiology. Funding for these kinds of initiatives are even more important, but it just boils down to every one of us having a heart ? and if you're lucky enough to be born with a healthy one, I think it is your obligation to do your part and keep it healthy.?

This is the message that is driven home by the Heart & Stroke Foundation as well.

According to Trudy Rudolph, Senior Area Manager for the Foundation's York Region Office, nine out of 10 people have at least one risk factor for heart disease or stroke, and some preventative measures come right down to the community level.

?We raise the funds by the community, but it is for the community, whether it comes back in the form of an AED (automated external defibrillator) in a local arena, whether it is teaching hundreds of thousands of Canadians to do CPR, whether it is treatment or a medication that is funded through research ? all of that will impact all of our healthcare in this community,? she says. ?To have Joe and the Velosos come forward to represent the community, we need more of that. That is how we're successful in raising funds and it will come back to them and to their families as well.?

The fact that this fundraiser is very much for the community is a chord that resonates with Brian. By partnering with Harvey's/Swiss Chalet, they are able to support local businesses and, in turn, support the community.

?We can reach anyone in the community that has been touched by it,? says Brian. ?It is one thing to talk about Owen, but how many other Owens are in the community? We know about some and their stories aren't being heard. This is just another opportunity to support an individual or a group of people who aren't being heard.?

In the year since The Auroran last spotlighted Owen during Heart Month, he has endured a number of health challenges. He spent a

month in hospital on what his mother says was a non-heart-related matter, but, as she says, ?because his heart doesn't work properly, other parts of his body don't always work the way they should.?

As he gets older and more able to understand his heart defect and everything that that entails, Laura says these health bouts are becoming increasingly difficult for him.

?That is why it is so important to continue to talk about this because it is not a one-time thing, and it is really warming to know that people don't forget that and people still continue to do what they can because often it is easy enough just to give once and say, ?I've done my part.' But this is life-long. If your heart is not at 100 per cent, you can't expect anything else to be.?

Last year's Harvey's/Swiss Chalet campaign for the local Heart & Stroke Foundation raised just over \$5,600 for the foundation. This year, says Joe, has been a little bit more ?sluggish? than the last, but they are hoping to go over the \$6,000 mark before Heart Month comes to an end on February 28.

To help support the cause, head over to Harvey's/Swiss Chalet at Yonge and Henderson, visit heartandstroke.ca/give, or raise awareness on social media using the hashtag #moremoments.