

Next Stop: \$2 million -- pledges push Run/Walk for Southlake over the top



By Brock Weir

The Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex was bustling by dawn Sunday as thousands gathered to put their best feet forward to raise over \$180,000 (and counting) for their local hospital.

Sunday was the Run or Walk for Southlake, the wildly popular annual fundraiser for Southlake Regional Health Centre, which started eight years ago as the Hartwell Challenge. Now presented by Nature's Emporium, the Run/Walk surpassed their ultimate goal of raising a total of \$1 million since the Run's inception.

'It is so inspiring to think our community would care so much about their hospital to raise \$1 million,' said Neila Poscente, CEO of the Southlake Regional Health Centre Foundation. 'It is fabulous. You're always setting that aspirational, 'Wow, do you think we can do it?' goal, so when we realised that this year, with the support of the community, we could hit that million dollar mark, we were just blown away.'

So, what's next after reaching that goal as pledges continue to roll in?

'Two million!' said Ms. Poscente with a laugh. 'Every year, this event has gotten bigger and community support has gotten bigger, so we know we're onto something. The community loves their hospital and they want to partner with us to transform lives.'

This was a sentiment echoed by Dr. Dave Williams, President and CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre.

'At Southlake, we like to say we provide world-class care close to home, and we can't do that if we didn't have a world-class community to be able to support us,' he said.

Money raised through this year's Southlake Run will go a long way towards that transformation. Replacing each and every bed at Southlake is a priority right now, said Ms. Poscente, of a component of care that can often be overlooked. Further equipment for operating rooms are also needed, she added.

Jamie Pimek is one man who particularly values this path to transformation. Diagnosed with colon cancer at the age of 31, Mr. Pimek has served as an ambassador for this year's Run.

'When I first found out, initially I felt like I was in a bad dream,' he told runners. 'I was in shock disbelief, and after about the initial half-hour of feeling like I was in this bad dream, I thought to myself, now it is time to put on my work boots, and tackle all of this. I feel amazing. I think I am healthier than I have been in my entire life. Going through this experience has kind of given me a new outlook on life and I just look at things from a different perspective.'

Jamie's mother, Jennifer, said her son's initial diagnosis was like a 'punch in the stomach.' Her first thought was, 'Why him?' But she found comfort with Southlake.

'After that, I said to him we live so close to a worldwide cancer centre, so we're going to be fine,' she said. 'That is so incredibly important because Jamie felt so ill after his chemotherapy. In five minutes we got him home and he was comfortable. It is an incredible thing to have that so close to home.'

Jamie agreed: 'It made my life that much easier, but having the wonderful support from my friends, my family, my colleagues, just made it worthwhile going there. I knew I was doing it for a reason and all the great people around me helped me battle through it.'

Pledging for the Southlake Run is open until May 15. For more information, visit www.runforsouthlake.ca.