Owen's story inspires people to open their hearts

By Brock Weir

Owen Veloso wasn't expected to survive his first five months of life.

Born with a congenital heart defect, he has endured multiple open heart surgeries and now, eight-and-a-half-years later, he's going from strength to strength.

Yet, his family is not taking anything for granted.

?He's doing things that we never thought he'd do before,? says dad Brian. ?They go skiing at his school every week and the idea of him skiing we never thought was humanly possible. Now he is the first one to get up the hill, goes down, doesn't want anybody touching him?everything is amplified as a result of that.?

In sharing Owen's story, however, Brian and wife Laura, are amplifying the power of research, the work of the Heart & Stroke Foundation, and the generosity of local restaurant patrons.

Swiss Chalet and Harvey's on Yonge Street and Henderson Drive are in the midst of a $5,000 fundraising campaign this month, which also happens to be Heart Month.

Franchise owner Joe Anselmo says he was determined to raise funds for the Foundation and honour Owen, selling paper hearts at the point of purchase for $2 to $5.

?I knew Owen's story and I knew Brian from [our kids] hockey and I said, ?Why don't we just tie everything in together?'? says Joe, who said donations began to trickle in until they posted Owen's story on the wall, in the growing garden of paper hearts. ?Once I put up [the poster] with Owen's story, donations doubled.?

?When Joe reached out to me, I was just emotionally touched that someone else took an interest,? Brian recalls. ?When you have a medically fragile child, you feel somewhat isolated. You know other people who have similar situations, but in your day-to-day interactions, you feel like you're the only one who is dealing with that. For someone to go out of their way to raise money for, one, a great cause and, two, attach it to your child, makes you feel the community has got your back in a situation like that. It is important to us as a family; he has two other siblings and to know there are people rallying around him who just aren't his immediate family is, to me, a great cause.?

This is not the first time the community has rallied around young Owen. In April 2012, when he was just a toddler not quite three, he was made an Honourary Chief by the Central York Fire Services. It was the culmination of what became known as Owen's Wish Day, which helped raise the profile of congenital heart defects, and the work of the Heart and Stroke Foundation in both Aurora and Newmarket.

Since that time, Laura has continued her work with the Foundation and knows its value only too well.

?It's cathartic for me [to volunteer] because I personally can't fix his heart and I can't medically change what is happening,? says Laura. ?What I can do is raise awareness and raise funds so they can get the money they need. Of course, because the money goes into research, I want to work with organizations that will, in turn, help Owen and other kids.

?When we meet somebody, just locally, a business owner who wants to help the cause, it all ties into what I am doing and why I am doing what I am doing. People think because we have a medically fragile child that it is a family problem, but it is not. It is effecting the entire community.?

Laura cites an example of a boy at her daughter's school who died just over a year ago from a congenital heart defect very similar to Owen's. It effected everyone in the school, she says, underscoring the impact it had on his family.

?It is a community thing because it is one in 100,? she says. ?That means we're all effected.?

Nearly three years ago, Owen had his fifth open heart surgery. Kids with Owen's heart condition are generally only supposed to have three surgeries. The fact he had to endure five illustrates how complicated his particular case is.

?Ever since that last surgery, his level has just gone up tremendously,? says Brian. ?The things he was limited to beforehand, he is only limited to the strength he has, it is not necessarily his desire or inability to try it. We're not at the end of the road yet. There will be other procedures to come, but he has done very well over the last two years.

?At the time we had the Wish, he was in heart failure. Through the doctors, the medications and the procedures they put in place, he was able to get to where he could have that last surgery and be where he is right now.?

?The first survivors of his particular heart defect are only really becoming adults now,? Laura notes. ?Nobody actually had an idea of what happens in the future because there hasn't been anyone there yet. It is constantly changing and evolving and we are learning new things all the time.?

?And that,? says Brian, ?is a testament to the research.?