

Restaurants ? and young Owen ? join forces for Heart Month



By Brock Weir

There is very little the average parent can do to fix a child born with a congenital heart defect, but there's a lot they can do to make sure those who can have everything they need to do so.

This has been a driving force for Aurora parents Laura and Brian Veloso as they navigate this reality with their son Owen every day, and now, with the help of three local restaurants, the family is once again sharing their story to build awareness and raise money for the Heart & Stroke Foundation.

February is Heart Month and the Heart & Stroke Foundation is in the final stretch of a fundraising campaign that will have a lasting impact on the community.

Through to the end of the month, Swiss Chalet/Harvey's at Yonge and Henderson, along with East Side Mario's and the recently opened Kelseys Roadhouse, both on Bayview Avenue, will be selling \$2 Paper Hearts, which will be displayed throughout the restaurants.

While this is a first for the two Bayview Avenue restaurants, the south Aurora Swiss Chalet/Harvey's, and owner Joe Anselmo, has worked with the Velosos to raise over \$12,000 for the Heart & Stroke Foundation.

Owen was born with a congenital heart defect and wasn't expected to survive his first five months. After multiple open heart surgeries, he's now doing well and he, his parents, and his two other siblings, are flourishing.

'It's amazing what this event has created in the community,' says Brian. 'It's not just an event at restaurants, now it is an event with three restaurants. It is amazing how this initiative has touched other people to want to participate in not only doing something for the community, but doing something specifically for the Heart & Stroke Foundation.'

But it is also a double-edged sword, says Laura.

'On the one hand, we're just a regular family and Owen was dealt the hand he was dealt; he was born quite ill and we did what you think most families would do - you pull together and you all have to work together and go into survival mode,' she says. 'On the other hand, it's very touching because there's very little I can do as a parent to fix him physically, I really can't do much of anything, but I can do what I can to make sure the people who can fix him get everything they need.'

'Something good has to come from all the challenges that Owen has faced, and I feel if he can inspire people to look around and say, 'We need to pull together,' it is not just about one child, there are so many children and it takes a whole community working together to help raise these kids.'

The Velosos joined representatives of the Heart & Stroke Foundation and the three participating restaurants at Kelseys on Friday afternoon to accept a \$500 campaign boost from Recipe Unlimited, the parent company of Swiss Chalet, Kelseys and East Side Mario's.

Owen took a brief break from his bag of M&Ms to accept the cheque on behalf of Heart & Stroke.

'When we found out about this, we wanted to do something and be a part of it,' said Maureen Hart, Senior Director of Communications and Corporate Affairs, for Recipe Unlimited. 'This is something that really matters, not only in the broad sense

around Heart & Stroke and a desire to help, but it is really rooted in the community here with Owen and his family, and people really caring about the community.?

Trudy Rudolph, Manager of Community Fundraising, for the local branch of Heart & Stroke agreed.

?This is amazing, and we're grateful for Joe and his dedication and passion to not only surpass each year's (fundraising) benchmark, but to invite and encourage participation from other areas of the community,? said Ms. Rudolph. ?We need the community, whether it is in terms of fundraising or in terms of raising awareness, knowing what the signs are of a heart attack or stroke, knowing what to do if you witness somebody that is in crisis. It is a community of survivors and caregivers.?

All of the research they are able to support through events like these go right back to the community through programs, medications and other initiatives, she said, adding that the bigger this ?circle? gets the larger impact they can have on the community.

A particular focus for the Foundation this year will be on women's health. They have identified a large disparity that ?women are under-researched, under-treated, under-diagnosed and?over-dying? due to heart and stroke-related issues. Existing research on drug therapies, for instance, have often been done on men, she said, and it has been discovered that the drugs in question do not work the same way in women and, in some cases, can create more issues than they solve.

?We're looking to close the gap and we're looking to educate women to be their best advocates as well,? said Ms. Rudolph.