?Swabbing with the Stars? carries on legacy of Sarah Watkin

By Brock Weir

The plight of Sarah Watkin immediately struck a chord with the students at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School.

The young York Region girl was waging a brave battle with leukemia, awaiting a full match to be found with bone marrow donors. Not keen to wait, the students took matters into their own hands, organizing Something for Sarah, a school-wide ? and community-wide ? initiative to swab the cheeks of as many people for the National Bone Marrow Registry and help people like Sarah find good matches before it was too late.

Since then, their efforts have taken off like wildfire.

A relatively small initiative from Williams has since expanded across all York Region high schools, adding over 2,000 names to the Registry last year alone.

While Sarah ultimately lost her battle, students are determined to keep her legacy alive, spearheading another swabbing event this month in Sarah's honour: Swabbing with the Stars.

?You're a celebrity if you come and swab!? says Kelly Graham, a Grade 12 student, who is one of three leaders of the school's Peer Mentor program, which facilitates the annual event. ?All of the previous events were for Sarah. She ended up finding a partial match with her mom and wasn't needing a match for us, but I think it helped that we had this young girl who was, at the time, in remission on the path to success, put a face to the campaign.

?I think after she passed away, it was really important for us to do something to honour her and her family. It hit us pretty hard as a group. We have been mentors since Grade 10 and we were always campaigning with her. The Grade 9 music class even Skyped with her and sang Justin Bieber songs to her, so there was definitely a personal connection with us. It was really hard, but it is nice to be able to honour her family this way, keep her memory alive, and keep fighting for others.?

Fellow Peer Mentor leader Carly Robinson says the support from Sarah's family remains strong as ever.

?Her passing has propelled us to keep going and do what we do as mentors,? she says. ?We are all very involved in our community and have the same passion to do so. With her in mind, it is only making us go forward and put more effort into what we want to do.?

From the outset, a simple cheek swab immediately brought home how a small thing can have such a big impact on the wider world, adds leader Cassidy Van Stiphout.

?For our school, it started off as a small thing we decided we were going to do, but each year it keeps getting bigger and bigger and more people come out,? says Cassidy. ?The more people who come out, the more likely we are to get a match and help save somebody. If you want to make a difference, this is such an easy way to at least try and make a difference to people in the community.?

2,000 might seem like a pretty impressive number of potential matches that have come out of this initiative ? and it certainly is ? but it underscores the fact there is still a lot of work to be done, says Kelly, and sometimes it might be an uphill battle to deliver the key messages to the community as a whole to come out and get swabbed.

?Joining the Bone Marrow Registry is a very simple thing, just a simple swab of your cheek,? she says. ?I think the rumours of the [transplant] operation can kind of scare people off because a lot of people don't know there are two options for donating bone marrow. If you match someone, they don't always have to do the outpatient procedure where they put you under. Sometimes they can do it through blood and take out the marrow. It is just like giving blood.

?To know one match can be a life saved is huge, so to be able to add as many names to the registry as we can is really important because if it is one person that does match someone, that is someone's life saved.?

wSwabbing with the Stars will be held at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School on Wednesday, May 18 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The school is located at 39 Dunning Avenue. For more information, call the school at
905-727-3131.