

'We're living each day'

Cooks continue charity work while dealing with cancer

By Dan Delmar
The Suburban

Young philanthropist Sarah Cook and her mother Lorena are continuing to give back even though the family now has yet another hurdle in their path.

For the last eight years, the Cooks have been making sure that children undergoing cancer treatments are in as much comfort as possible. The Sarah Cook Fund has raised \$4.5 million for the Cedars Cancer Institute and the Montreal Children's Hospital Foundation, and Lorena said it's something the family had to do after receiving first-rate care from an attentive, compassionate staff.

"I wouldn't wish illness on anybody," she first told *The Suburban* last year, "but if the journey of your life is such that your child needs to be in a hospital, the Children's is unbelievable. I find it therapeutic to be there."

During a family vacation in California in 2000, Sarah, then 8-years-old, complained of a sore leg. American doctors initially thought it was a hairline fracture, but the diagnosis was a lot more troubling once the TMR family returned to Montreal. After undergoing more exhaustive tests, they were told it was Ewing sarcoma, a rare form of cancer where the malignant cells are found in bone or tissue.

Now, Sarah is facing yet another challenge as her cancer has reappeared and she is undergoing chemotherapy once again. Lorena remains optimistic and confident that the

family will overcome adversity once again. The holidays will be a bit more low-key this year, because Sarah has a chemo treatment scheduled for just two days before Christmas — but her mom emphasizes that the most important thing is that the whole family will be together for the holidays.

"She won't be feeling well on the 25th," Lorena said. "At this time of year, when you're going through something like this, it's good to be happy together and enjoying these moments."

Sarah is now finishing up a CEGEP program at Lower Canada College and is applying to out-of-province schools, but her mother won't let her stray too far from home.

"We've given her a two to three-hour radius. As parents, we just want her to come back here and be followed (by doctors)."

"I remember bits and pieces," from her first round of treatments, Sarah said last year, speaking with *The Suburban* after being in remission for the previous seven years. "I remember the first time I went into the hospital for surgery. I was holding a stuffed animal they had cleaned to make it safe. I was terrified, nervous and didn't really know what was happening and why it was happening to me."

She went through chemotherapy and radiation treatments successfully, then other surgeries to repair her foot and ankle. She still has trouble running, but has otherwise lived the

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SUN YOUTH

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Yet another new category of those seeking help are the victims of former investment advisor Earl Jones.

"These are people who used to be on the giving end, and now they're on the receiving end. We prepared Christmas baskets for them and we're helping on an ongoing basis. That's a new type of clientele that we've never seen before."

Stevens said the organization is now in need of non-perishable canned items such as meats and chunky soups, as well as hygiene products.

"And that's another thing we're addressing

that we never had to worry about before — hand sanitizers. Avmor has given us 5,000 bottles of hand sanitizers, and we've made up hygiene kits. So everybody coming into Sun Youth Organization receives a kit, which for the first time includes hand sanitizers. It's being made available to fire victims and people we visit when we do home deliveries... this is a life-saving measure.

"And we even have staff who are booking sick, and if you lose a person for eight, nine days, you have to replace them. We can't just close this operation, so we have to have people stepping up to the plate.

"So this makes it twice as hard as it would have been in any other year. Now we still have the effects of the recession and the pandemic — two issues we never had to worry about." ■

COOK

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life of a normal teenager. When she finished her last treatment at the time, winning her first battle with cancer and lifting a gigantic weight off the family's shoulders, the date was September 11, 2001.

"The day most of the world was mourning, we were celebrating," Lorena recalled. "We were elated. It was a very interesting day."

"It was an amazing feeling to know I was done and I could go home," Sarah said, adding that the odd timing probably contributed to her becoming a young fundraising machine. "It made me appreciate life that much more."

The Fund helped replace beds at the Children's, add bathrooms and TVs, and smaller touches too; Sarah and her father, Norman, would stay up nights discussing what improvements could be made, and they began with the lumpy pillows. That area in the Children's Hematology/Oncology department is now known as "Sarah's Floor," and is a heck of a lot more comfortable.

Recent events like the Splash and Dash race and the Kids For Kids Magic party raised nearly a quarter-million dollars last

month alone. On top of helping to make the Children's more comfortable, the Fund also invested \$1-million that went towards the purchase of Quebec's first intra-operative MRI, which allows surgeons to monitor the body in real-time during surgery. Because many Torontonians took part in the fundraising events, Sarah and Lorena plan to travel to the Ontario capital next month to deliver a \$25,000 cheque to the Sick Kids hospital. And the Cooks also help families dealing with cancer on a more basic level.

"Cancer can be expensive," Lorena said. Medicare does not cover extra expenses like Graval (medication to ward-off nausea), special immune-boosting food products, transport costs and other items that many families are not prepared to deal with. Going through cancer treatments during the holidays is far from ideal, and Lorena advises parents to use the occasion to strengthen family bonds and rally around the one who is ill.

"The support has been tremendous," she said. "All of our friends and family are being supportive... To me, that's what it's all about. We're living each day." ■

ROUNDTABLE

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from a local school for 10 sessions of cooking lessons — just the basics, cutting, making sandwiches and soups, and they get to bring it home. "It's to get the kids involved in the cooking process," says cooking instructor Dominique Caron, a small but important step to helping a family navigate mealtime affordably and nutritiously. Another program helps mothers aged 16-20 prepare their own nutritious and affordable meals with babies in tow. "By teaching them cooking basics and how to prepare proper meals for themselves at low cost, they are helping to integrate back into society," says Cousineau. "We give them the tools they need," adds Caron, "and we teach them some basic food facts and recipes that they can take home with them, along with about two days' worth of food." All participants are referred by the local CSSS, so they can learn to care for themselves.

Cousineau is also organizing a group-buying program, arranging deals with wholesalers and distributors to pass along savings to clients. The Table Ronde also operates as a distribution point for the Bonne Boîte Bonne Bouffe (Good Food Box) program buying group for fresh fruits and vegetables. ■