

OMDREB 2016 Educational Scholarship Award

***What is the impact dealing with critical illness
has on families and how can a community
assist with these challenges?***

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My sister had cancer. Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The doctors say it is the '*good one*.' What does that mean? How did this happen? Why would this illness attack a 19 year old athletic, positive person? Where do we start? As this news began to spread through our community, people experienced the similar shocking reactions as we did. What? This cannot be happening. As we processed this diagnosis, it became apparent that we needed help in dealing with Sydney's critical illness and access supports in our community to meet these challenges.

As this journey unfolded, our family entered an unfamiliar territory – the cancer community. Gathering knowledge about the diagnosis and the medical path that would unfold helped to combat the feelings of fear, anger, and helplessness. While the medical professionals helped Sydney and our family through the rollercoaster of medical testing, chemotherapy treatments, and learning the language of this cancer community, it was the development of a personal network that played a significant role in the healing process. Different people play a different role in supporting Sydney, my parents, and me. This network quickly grew beyond medical

professionals, family and friends as people genuinely wanted to offer support through sharing their lived cancer experience, acts of kindness, and prayers. Individuals looked for ways they could use their skills and resources to support each of us. This is how a community supports families during a critical illness.

For me, my school community reached out to offer flexibility in completing assignments, writing tests, and managing homework. The team of teachers supported my needs so I could be successful academically while playing baseball and most importantly, being there for my sister. As a school community, more support for teenagers and their families needs to continue so teens and their families can meet the challenges of a critical illness while maintaining some level of 'normalcy' to their lives.

For teenagers, our high school is our 'home'. Our school community has built a supportive hub not only for students or staff who are dealing with a critical illness but for the entire neighbouring community. Awareness and actions build a strong support network to help combat the challenges of health concerns. Throughout Halton, school communities provide opportunities for teenagers to advocate for resources and support for those impacted by a critical illness. During this Spring, there are many concrete examples of teenagers and teachers participating in these active events. In

April, White Oaks Secondary School hosted their ninth annual Inside Ride for kids with cancer. In May, Iroquois Ridge Secondary School held their Relay for Life including ribbon promotions and the Survivor Walk. This is an extremely rewarding experience as I participated in Oakville Trafalgar High School's Relay for Life and helped to raise the most money in all of Canada in 2015. At Dr. Frank J. Hayden Secondary School, students will be competing in the Battle of the Bands Night for all Halton musicians with proceeds targeting teen cancer supports. Both the Catholic and the Public School Athletic Associations have held "Think Pink" game days as teams wore pink shirts, socks, and shoelaces to demonstrate their collective support during athletic competitions. These are a few examples of the numerous events and campaigns school communities develop to build a strong support network for helping families deal with the challenges of critical illnesses.

To an outsider, these events may look like frivolous fun. However, these events develop a sense of belonging and a collective action to make a difference. Subsequently, this supports critically ill people and their families to know that they are not alone and a community is standing strong with them as they deepen their knowledge about the illness and explore ways to support each other in this journey. The impact of cancer is wide and deep and thus, these events should not be seen as 'frivolous' or an excuse to get

together. Instead, these events are powerful messages that support people during their personal challenges with cancer. Most importantly, teenagers need to be encouraged to develop creative strategies to increase knowledge and gather momentum to collectively support those impacted by critical illnesses.

In the wider Halton region, many organizations have had a positive collective impact on helping patients and their families deal with critical illnesses. Places such as our local Wellspring offer programs for people to better understand their illnesses and how to live with them during their treatments. However, many of these tend to be more 'adult' oriented and thus, teenagers are not comfortable accessing their programs. Nationally, Cancer Canada has coordinated resources and information with easy access points including printed materials, online websites, and connected blogs. This holistic approach reaches out to touch everyone regardless of geography, age or demographics. Therefore, patients and their families do not feel alone in these challenges. However, Cancer Canada and Halton services need to use social media in a more dynamic manner in order to connect with adolescent patients and their friends who are supporting them. Teens rely on "Dr. Google" for information and support. Instead, Halton Region should promote a more youth friendly campaign to encourage teens to use their blogs such as www.mylifeline.ca and online peer support groups similar to Gilda's Club

in Toronto www.gildasclubtoronto.org to remove the stigma of being ill or needing support.

Teenagers and their families living with a critical illness need support within Halton to reduce the negativity of these physical and mental challenges. While Halton communities provide great supports for adults, these strategies need to be shaped to target the specific needs of critically ill teenagers and their personal network. Teenagers have a strong desire to make a difference while feeling a sense of belonging and supporting each other. Therefore, teenagers need to be encouraged to host events such as Relay For Life or Inside Ride to celebrate the actions of a community standing together to help teenagers who are critically ill and their families. Through this action oriented purpose, teenagers can better support their critically ill friend and make a difference in reducing the stigma of these illnesses.

While many programs in our Halton communities are excellent for supporting critically ill adults and their network, our communities need to look at developing programs to address teenage support systems. Programs such as *Looking good, feeling better* and *Nutrition & Exercise Therapy* classes need to be targeted for teenagers as their concerns are different than adults suffering the same critical illness. Overall, we are fortunate to live and learn in Halton as it is a nurturing and active community for supporting individuals

and their families who are impacted by a critical illness through fantastic programs and networks. In moving forward, we need to encourage programs and supports in our Halton communities that focus upon the unique needs of critically ill teenagers, their friends, and families as they meet the challenges of an illness together.

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