

Local hero? donates bone marrow

By Jeff Doner

A hero can be the one who scores the game-winning goal, hits a walk off home run in the bottom of the ninth inning or maybe heroes are only meant to be found on the pages of comic books.

In



the case of 10-year-old Landon Henry from Regina, King resident Jason Watt is the image of a true hero.

The two met for the first time recently since Watt donated a rather large amount of bone marrow that saved Landon's life nearly three years ago.

It is really good to come and meet them, said a smiling Landon. Meeting Jason and his family is awesome.

It was pretty exciting, that's for sure, Landon's dad Craig quickly added. We've spent so much time going back and forth with him and his family and we've known for quite a while now that we were going to come out and visit, but just to finally get here and meet them is just amazing. Hard time getting to sleep last night.

In July 2010, Landon was diagnosed with severe aplastic anemia, a rare condition which prevents bone marrow from being able to do its usual job of replenishing and creating new blood cells.

What they figured was that this virus shut down all his bone marrow his blood producing system, said Landon's mom, Tammy.

One of the doctors in Regina said he sees one case of this every three years. Years ago, they said it would have been fatal.

At first doctors weren't quite sure what he had, but as time went on, it was clear that Landon was going to need a bone marrow transplant as other treatments weren't working. In August 2010, the search for a donor was on.

They tested his brothers first (Kellen, 15, and Reece 13) and found that they weren't matches, Tammy said. There was only a 25 per cent chance either brother would match but Jason was perfect. He matched better than Landon's own brothers. He was a 10 out of 10 for a match.

At the time, Watt had already been on the registry for several years after signing up in 1998 when his friend Carol Olsen was diagnosed with leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant.

Watt credited Jeff and Carol Olsen's foundation, Friends for Life for inspiring him into becoming a donor.

I wouldn't have had the opportunity to save this guy's life, because I wouldn't have known anything about it, he said.

However, it wasn't until 12 years later that he would get the call telling him that he was a match for someone who was looking for a donor.

In mid-September, I got a call on my cell phone at work from One Match saying that I was on the short list for someone who needed a transplant. Following a few blood tests I was the closest match and ended up having the donation procedure on Oct. 20, 2010.

I had no fears at all, he continued. When they (One Match) first called me from Ottawa to say, we're looking for your bone marrow, because it's a match, I wanted to hurry the process up to help them out even faster. And hurry they did. Just a few hours later, Landon was given the transfusion and on the road to recovery.

At that point, both Watt and the Henry family admitted it was tough having to wait a year to find out the identities of one another (as regulations dictate).

Landon, with the help of the hospital he was at, was able to get out a letter thanking his donor that would in no way give up his identity.

Thank you so much for giving me your stem cells, the hand-written letter read. They are working good. I feel great and I am out of the hospital now. My family is so happy.

Watt said that was all he needed to see until they were able to meet.

That was a highlight for sure, he said.

After the procedure, it was a lengthy recovery for Landon. He missed Grade 2, had to stop having friends over and couldn't go out in public due to a severely weakened immune system.

Most of all, Landon said he missed playing sports during his recovery.

When I was sick, I couldn't play sports, but now I can play hockey and football.

Watt said it is amazing to see him back playing sports and thriving.

The kid now is winning championships, playing sports, leading his team in scoring in hockey, he said proudly.

Landon now plays hockey, football and ball hockey and said it feels good to be able to play again.

He now gets regular checkups, is doing great and his parents said he was incredible through a tough few years.

He was really good. There was never any complaining or whining. He hated the IV though, Craig recalled.

When they were in Ontario visiting Watt, his wife Jenn and their family, the group certainly made the most of their time lounging poolside, visiting a cottage in Muskoka, traveling to Niagara Falls, a Blue Jays game and a visit to the Hockey Hall of Fame. All things Landon had a part in planning and couldn't wait to do.

It's very exciting, said Tammy. We've all been thinking about it for quite some time. Landon was very excited. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to say to Jason when he saw him, but they're just going to get to know one another. We've been talking about it for so long, so there's been the buildup and now were here.

Craig said Watt and his family have been incredible throughout the trip.

We were standing outside the airport waiting for these people to come pick us up that we know, but have never met and all of a sudden this big motor home pulls up and what we've learned about Jason already, we shouldn't have been surprised, he said with a laugh. It has been wonderful. They are terrific people.

Great weather, great scenery and great times, but the people here are the real story, Craig continued. Unbelievably friendly, fun-loving, welcoming and hospitable. We have really been embraced by everyone here, so we feel like honorary Ontarians.

Although just meeting in person for the first time, Landon himself put it best: he helped give me a new life.

For more information on Jeff and Carol Olsen's foundation, Friends for Life, visit www.friendsforlifegala.com and One Match at www.blood.ca.