

St. Joseph's hosts benefit concert for Saving Laura

By Brock Weir

Laura, a Grade 2 student at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School, spent this Christmas a long way from home.

Staying with her parents in Texas with the support of a local church, however, she had a taste of home that morning opening up a box of cards, drawings, and other goodies from her fellow students, teachers, and wider school community.

It was a bright spot on a long journey which has taken Laura, and her parents Janusz and Mira, seeking alternative treatment for Laura's inoperable and otherwise untreatable brain stem tumour.

Recently diagnosed at the age of seven, her parents were naturally devastated by the diagnosis the tumour could take her life in mere months, but they would not give up hope. She is now receiving extensive treatment at the Texas-based Burzynski Clinic for alternative cancer treatment, a course of action which has not been without controversy.

But, as her parents sprang into action to keep hope alive, so too did Laura's close-knit school community. Out of pocket \$25,000 on their first visit, each continuing month of therapy will run the family over \$30,000 and students, their parents, and St. Joseph's faculty have looked for ways they can help ease the burden.

"I will be honest, we cried here for two weeks," says Christine deHaas, principal of St. Joseph. "It was a terrible time. Laura herself was here at the time but she was not aware she had an inoperable tumour, but just knew she was sick."

Students too began to pick up that something was amiss when the tumour began pressing on her optic nerve, causing her to wear an eye patch before being fitted with special glasses.

"We have always said what this family has gone through is every parent's worst nightmare," says Ms. deHaas. "You pray to God it doesn't happen to you, but it has happened to them. It is controversial what they are doing [as the treatment] is not endorsed in Canada and the United States, but I always just ask the question, 'What would you do if it was your child?' You wouldn't want money to be the barrier. We're not making a huge dent in the financial burden here, but we're just helping the family and providing a bit of support."

One of the first initiatives students pulled together was a sale Rainbow Loom bracelets. The initiative stemmed from earlier Rainbow Looms made at the school's weekly Friday art club, of which Laura is a member. Grade 5 student Julia came up with the idea to make bracelets specifically for Laura and through pre-Christmas sales made \$5,500.

The idea soon caught on with parents who eventually approached the school's administration with the idea for a benefit.

"One parent talked to another parent and it just started to grow," says Ms. deHaas. "The whole thing has been a humbling experience. People come into the school to drop off money, they have been dropping off auction items, and it has been unbelievable."

The result is "Saving Laura", a benefit concert which will take place at The Mansion (formerly Dinardo's) this Thursday, January 16 from 6.30 - 9 p.m.

Organized in just a matter of weeks, parent volunteers have put together an extensive program of performances and initiatives for the whole family.

Sponsored in part by Knock-out Entertainment Music Management, the evening will include performances from The Wet Bandits, With The Lights Off, and a special performance by Vaughan native Angelica DiCastro. Additionally, silent auction items range from spa treatments to tickets to see the Toronto Maple Leafs and Lady Antebellum.

Organizers met at the school Friday to start putting the finishing touches on the evening, including Lisa Pettinelli. Ms. Pettinelli's son and Laura have been friends for years. Hearing what the family was going through, and knowing Laura is her parents' only child, she felt the need to get involved.

“They have no family here in Canada at all and I just wanted to do whatever possible, any possible help at all, to raise money for them and help them out with this alternative therapy,” she says.

Pulling everything together, however, has been tough, but support from the wider community has made things much easier.

“The people have been great,” says Ms. Pettinelli. “Everyone is doing things at no cost. I have been getting a lot of feedback from people who want to help. It is for a good cause and that is all that matters.”

At the time of this writing, over 200 tickets for Thursday's benefit have been sold and The Mansion has donated the use of their extensive banquet hall at very little cost.

Adds Ms. deHaas: “The community has been amazing. It is humbling because every day somebody walks through the door, we have never met them before and they are either here to say they have heard about this little girl in Grade 2 and wanted to make a donation or provide their support. We have never set a goal for this. We have donated the \$5,500 from Rainbow Looms and whatever we can make on this event is totally going to Laura's trust fund. If five people came and we made \$100, that is \$100 right there.”

Tickets for Saving Laura are available for \$15 each or \$5 for children 12 and under, by contacting Sonia at 416-816-7103, or can be picked up directly from St. Joseph Elementary School (2 Glass Drive, Aurora, 905-727-5782). For more information, visit savinglaura.com.