

## East-end family calls charity aid 'a blessing'



by Laura Cummings

At first glance, bubbly 15-year-old Bronwyn Lefebvre is like any other busy teenager. She plays soccer, loves dance – jazz and hip hop in particular – and hits the books hard to maintain her honour roll average at St. Matthew High School.

For the Orléans resident, however, her impressive list of achievements is made all the more remarkable by the hurdles she's had to overcome – namely, her decade-long struggle with lupus.

Though Bronwyn was officially diagnosed at seven years old, symptoms of the disease began appearing at five, explains her mother, Julie Lefebvre. Since then, Bronwyn has been in and out of Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and on constant medication, Julie adds. Lupus – a chronic autoimmune disease that can result in severe inflammation and tissue damage – has meant rashes, zapped energy and various "flare-ups" impacting areas like the heart and brain for the east-end teen.

With the flare-ups always resulting in hospitalization, Bronwyn says it's frustrating "being away from friends and school, and having to catch up when I get back", in addition to dealing with the hospital experience and the testing that accompanies it.

To make matters worse, Julie recounts, after Bronwyn's CHEO doctor moved out of town last year she was referred to the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, meaning regular visits – along with the requisite travelling expenses and missed work.

That's where the Jennifer Ashleigh Children's Charity (JACC) stepped in, she adds, after a recommendation from CHEO staff. JACC – a provincially-based organization that financially assists seriously ill children – has helped the family pay for hotel stays and transportation expenses incurred while going to and from Toronto, Julie explains.

"It helped a great deal ... it was a blessing," she says.

"It's a lot easier for us to travel, without having to worry about getting train tickets or hotels," adds Bronwyn. "It's all taken care of for us."

Otherwise, Julie continues, she and Bronwyn would be forced to do a "drag-out, all-day thing (to Toronto) ... trying to just go and get there at 4 a.m. in the morning. To both of us it would be really, really tiring."

While Bronwyn and her family are one example of thankful recipients, JACC is currently in the midst of a funding shortfall that means assistance to approximately 20 children – totalling about \$20,000 – is delayed each month.

The figures were released at the charity's annual auction and dinner in May, and inspired by the organization's need, Toronto-area businessperson Richard Muir issued a challenge to match donations up to \$20,000 from June 20 until July 31.

Collecting for the fundraising drive to meet Richard's challenge has been a little sluggish, admits Peggy Bower, JACC's development manager – "there are so many charities with so many hands out," she explains – but says she believes JACC will accomplish their goal of raising \$20,000 before the end of the month.

JACC offers eight different programs – in areas like emergency assistance, care-giving and personal needs – that direct monetary aid to youth up to 21-years-old and their families, Bower explains, with a \$2,500 annual maximum for each individual. Most average somewhere closer to \$700 or \$800 a year, however, she adds. At least 100 to 150 children from the Ottawa area – out of the approximately 800 they help annually – are aided by JACC, Bower continues.

"We're the last resort – we're the safety net," she says. "(JACC) is there when they need it the most ... we're appealing to the public to help us meet the challenge."



Julie Lefebvre and her daughter Bronwyn, who suffers from lupus, are benefiting from help from the Jennifer Ashleigh Children's Charity. Photo by Darren Brown