



Good News Toronto

OUR EVERYDAY HEROES

Louise Russo: A Voice Against Violence



Louise Russo facing challenges with courage

By Kate De Freitas

On the morning of April 21, 2004, Louise Russo was a typical, hard-working mother of three. That evening, however, Louise's life significantly altered when she was caught in the line of fire at a local sandwich shop in Toronto's northwest end, as bullets shattered the store window and left her paralyzed from the waist down.

Her independence was

torn away that night and her life dramatically changed, all in a matter of seconds. She explains, "It's difficult; you go from being independent to needing to rely on people for the littlest thing. I can't just jump out of bed and be out the door anymore; it takes me over two hours to get ready." But Louise does not dwell on her losses; instead she explains, "I try to find another alternative, I try to be positive."

Louise's determination to

spin her unfortunate situation into a positive one is inspiring. Her voice is soft and caring, and it becomes apparent as she speaks that she is not angry with what life has allotted her; instead she feels blessed that she has been given another day. She says, "It is much easier to be down on yourself, but I try to see each new day as a blessing. I was given a second chance and I

"It is much easier to be down on yourself, but I try to see each new day as a blessing. I was given a second chance and I want to make the most of it."

want to make the most of it."

Louise founded the non-profit organization W.A.V.E. (Walk Against Violence Everywhere) and began sharing her story to inspire youth to take responsibility for their communities by helping to reduce the amount of violence in their neighbourhoods. Louise visits various schools across the GTA on a weekly basis, targeting students in grades 7 to 10. She conducts what she calls "choice-making workshops" where she discusses the importance of

making the "right" choices in life. These interactive workshops have proven to be very positive at the schools, and have garnered a great deal of interest from the students.

Her motivation to continue with this voyage comes from the knowledge that she is making a difference in the lives of Toronto youths. She describes an email she received once from a young man at a high school at which she spoke. He wrote: "You let me see the world differently from how I've been seeing it." It is remarks such as these that give Louise the strength to get out of bed each morning and face a new day with a fresh outlook; as she says, "If I can make a difference in the life of just one man, it was worth it."

Louise foresees a day when it will be a rare occurrence in Toronto for an innocent person to be victimized through random acts of violence. She believes it can be done through Toronto's youth, which is why she continues to educate. She wants to change the way young people view violence. She shows them the results of violence by rolling her wheelchair through their school hallways. She addresses the aftermath of victimization, and, moreover, discusses the affects violence has on the families of the accused. She

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is an emblem, and what she represents means something to these kids. She recognizes this, and bears the hardships of facing a new day for these youths; she is a hero for it.

The City of Toronto has recognized Louise's accomplishments and selflessness, and has presented her with a park in her name. When asked about the Louise Russo Park, she modestly replies, "It's embarrassing." Despite all of the good that Louise has contributed to her community, she is humbled by this honour.

In fact, she explains that she only agreed to the park

Louise Cont'd on pg. 10

More than a Memory

By Robin Bond

Four of his short nine years of life were spent gracing the school hallways of Father Serra Catholic School. A plaque in dedication to him hangs on the wall near the main office.

"He's running the annual Terry Fox Run there," Mrs. Gerri Lucia says, gesturing to a picture of him. "He died

a few short months later."

Suffering from leukemia, Ian MacDonald lost his courageous battle to the disease, but the hallways of Father Serra still echo with his name. On April 18th of this year, the school held their annual dance-a-thon fundraiser in memory of him — or rather, in light of him.

Gerri is one of a few teachers who organize the fundraiser each year. To date,

they have raised more than \$44,000 for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, which works to find a cure for leukemia, lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, and myeloma, and to improve the quality of life for its patients and their families. Father Serra is the only school in Canada who donates to this very important cause.

More Cont'd on pg. 10



Father Serra Students dancing and donating

Dear Reader,



continues to give me unconditional love and support. Feeling cared for has given me the stability to venture forth in life with optimism. I have been blessed. Her gift to me has meant that I have always strived to be a generous mother as well, giving as much love to my family as she gave to me.

Welcome to our fourth issue. May is such a beautiful month in Toronto; I associate it with mothers. That means Mother's Day, Mother Earth, and the many wonderful nurturing manifestations of mothering by both men and women.

As far as Mother's Day per se, I have always been a bit resentful of being told when to celebrate this pivotal person in my life, but I have also always cherished opportunities to connect with my family, and it does offer me a chance for expressing gratitude to my Mother for giving me the greatest gift: being a model of a mother. She was a creative career woman to whom our small family was the number one priority and who, fortunately, is still vibrantly alive and

All the heroes this month possess these positive maternal qualities of being caring, protective, warm, and tender. They all have extended beyond themselves. They all have given of themselves in order to find a cure, further a cause, or make just one person's life better. Our heroes are male and female, young and advanced in years.

Some of our heroes have endured unimaginable tragedies and have used their suffering as a place from which to connect to the community to bring messages of hope. To me, these individuals are the greatest heroes in our world. I am humbled by their spirit to rise above their tragic situations and become compassionate community activists. From loss to gain, they have extended their arms around

the community in a warm, tender embrace.

I draw great inspiration from the fact that each hero has chosen to act on their vision. From a wheelchair or a skateboard, at school or at work, each person has set in motion their desire to make someone else's world a better place. They have enacted Gandhi's famous dictum: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Their demonstrative action creates a profound inner journey, and by appearing in Good News Toronto, they have allowed us to share in this deep experience.

I have included a new monthly section on the small things we can all continue to do to make Toronto an even better city in which to live. We all have the ability to make changes by nurturing someone and caring about our community, thereby affecting our world.

Benjamin Franklin said: "If you would be loved, love and be lovable."

*In gratitude,
Eva Karpati
Publisher/Editor*

Letter to editor

Dear Editors:

I have just finished reading this issue of your magazine. It is great to find a publication that focuses on all the good things that happen in Toronto. I was especially pleased to see the profile on Susan Hay, who has been doing such good work on and off screen for so many years now. Keep up the good work!

Jack J. Slaughter April 16th



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Marni Zaretsky
Jennifer Sanasie

Contributors:
Susie Berg
Pam Churchill
Kevin Meade
Mark Millard
Rick Ross

Good News Toronto
OUR EVERYDAY HEROES

Good News Toronto offers stories about the multitude of diverse, generous, caring, and inspiring people who live in Toronto, with the goal of motivating all of us to continue to make this a city rich in everyday heroes.

Good News Toronto is a monthly newspaper distributed throughout the Great Toronto Area.

Good News Toronto is a non-profit endeavour committed to publishing works by aspiring and experienced writers and artists.



416 661 2556
info@goodnewstoronto.ca
www.goodnewstoronto.ca

Rob Dyer: Skating 4 a Cure

By Mark Millard

At 15 years old, Rob Dyer had a dream of changing the world.

The Newmarket, Ontario native initially found his vision of skateboarding across North America to raise money and awareness for cancer research rejected by friends and peers. Although his idea was seen as overly ambitious and unrealistic, love, passion, and determination turned his once laughed-at dream into reality.

Finding inspiration in his hero, Terry Fox, and his

mother, Wendy, who was battling cancer at the time, he knew that his dream needed to come true. "When I first brought up the idea I was shut down, and I didn't even mention it again for two years, but in the end I knew that I needed to do this," he said. "I just wanted to do something to help turn such a negative situation into something positive down the road."

In 2002, Rob once again spoke of his plan, but this time he was met with much support, and he organized a team of volunteers and fundraisers to aid him on his

8,000-kilometre skate across North America. Although everything finally seemed to be coming together, Rob was forced to overcome several tragedies in a short time-span.

Four months prior to his departure, Rob was affected by the deaths of several loved ones. Both of his grandmothers, one of his closest friends, and his mother all died of cancer. Although Rob simply could have given up, the tragedies reaffirmed for him why he needed to do the skate. "So many people are going through cancer

and they don't give up, so we can't give up either," he said.

Skate4Cancer was officially born, and in March of 2004, Rob and his team met in Los Angeles, California, and began their journey across North America. The following five months would prove to be very difficult. Little did Rob know what adversities he would have to overcome throughout his expedition.

As Rob made his way into Arizona, he developed a stress fracture in his ankle. He was informed by a doctor that he needed a cast and that he should no longer continue the skate, but Rob chose to ignore the advice and kept going, relying on his determination to honour the loved ones he had tragically lost.

Soon after, Rob and his team were forced to deal with another demoralizing turn of events, as their main sponsor, who had funded the team a bus for the trip, could no longer continue on the skate. Rob was forced to keep skateboarding on his own, going as far as spending nights sleeping alone in a ditch or on a park bench.

More difficult challenges were thrown Rob's way, but his passion for skateboard-



Rob Dyer on the road

ing, his love for the world, and his determination to honour those whom he had lost helped him to overcome even after devastating event.

In July of 2004, Rob completed his journey in his home town of Newmarket. The trip not only raised cancer awareness, but it also taught many people an important lesson. "In a situation like this, you really learn what you're capable of, and that's anything that you put your mind to," he said. "We all have the ability to make the world a better place."

Although Skate4Cancer continues to use its original idea of skateboarding to raise awareness, Rob and his team have now gotten involved in the music scene and with the high school community. "Getting as many people

Rob Cont'd on pg. 5



Rob Dyer skateboarding across North America

Nina Herman: Changing Expectations

By Pam Churchill

Mother's Day calls attention not only to our mothers, but also to those special women who have shaped our lives and made the world a better place. Nina Herman is one of those women. Hers is a story about inspiring women who are daunted by growing old and, along the way, helping to change the way older women are seen and treated.

She accomplished this in part through an organization that she and Elsie Ticoll co-founded back in 1986. Elsie's main focus was feminism, and Nina's was on older women's issues, so they agreed on a feminist organization for older women. Together with a few friends they envisioned a new organization to be named the

Older Women's Network, which would bring women together and work to change their lives. Then came the work of building it.

...she is changing the expectations of aging, and inspiring the rest of us to give purpose to our older years!

In 1987, Nina persuaded the Women's Program of the Secretary of State in Ottawa to provide some funding, and got the Ontario Institute of Education to host three public forums. The first, moderated by Doris Anderson, was entitled "Women in Limbo." It was a smashing success and got full coverage in *The Globe and Mail*. The second

and third, which focused on housing options and mandatory retirement, drew rave reviews as well.

The following year, OWN, as the organization is affectionately known, was incorporated. This May will mark its twentieth anniversary. OWN members will celebrate its accomplishments, which includes the OWN housing co-op on The Esplanade, and will renew their commitment to carry on with their work.

There is much more to Nina's story. Her activism began early and her roots as a feminist run both deep and strong. She honed her convictions as a single parent, completing a degree in Social Work after her husband died. In his honour, she established the George Herman House, for people recovering from mental ill-



Nina Herman

ness. Her salaried work was in community development, and her later volunteer work with OWN included being its first chair and representing it in Beijing.

Nina is still at it. Today she is the driving force behind The Willowdale Action Group, a neighbourhood OWN group that meets regularly to advocate for political

change on behalf of older women. Last March she organized an all candidates meeting in the local federal by-election. Recently she reprised her early career in acting. Few know that she was one of the stars in the radio serial *Ma Perkins*, and that her love of theatre has never diminished. Now there is time for it again, and in February she appeared as the Duchess of York in *Scenes from Shakespeare* by ACT II, a drama group for seniors at Ryerson University. Once again, she is changing the expectations of aging, and inspiring the rest of us to give purpose to our older years!

Pam Churchill is a past Chair of OWN and currently GTA Chair of Women 4 African Grandmothers

The Josiah Lynch Community Organization: Raising a Generation of Leaders

By Nicole
Georges-Bennett

It's been just over a year since Dale Lynch and his wife Michelle said goodbye to their baby son Josiah. Josiah was born 24 weeks premature on November 14, 2006, weighing only 1 pound, 10 ounces. Despite severe medical complications, Josiah bravely fought for life, but succumbed to death on December 20, 2006. His parents, who are devoted Christians, were devastated by their loss, but knew they wanted to do something to show how much of an impact Josiah's brief life had had on them. His father, Dale, in particular says his tiny son changed his whole outlook on life.

"When I saw his struggle, I realized how honoured I

"When I saw his struggle, I realized how honoured I was to be his father."

was to be his father. I had a sense of his personality, even though he only lived five weeks. On the last day he lived, I walked into the room and he saw me and he smiled. I don't want to forget how he made me feel, he made me a better person." Dale adds that, prior to Josiah's birth,

he had felt in control of life and able to handle challenges on his own. "After he was born I created a blog. I knew I had to reach out in faith with other people; and I began to reach out in my faith and I believed in the hope he would live, and I shared my hope."

After Josiah's passing, Dale decided to create a non-profit organization that would help at-risk youth: The Josiah Lynch Community Organization. "We were already volunteering with a group called Heart to Heart Ministries, which initiates programs for youth. I decided to work with the kids who were over twelve, drawing from my own experience growing up black in Scarborough. I wanted to let kids know God made them special and people do care about them. Their lives are valuable."

Under the auspices of Heart to Heart Ministries, the Josiah Lynch Community Organization runs a Saturday basketball program for males aged twelve years and older. Dale and eight other volunteers run basketball practices from three school gyms: L'Amoureux Collegiate, Marc Garneau Collegiate, and Don Mills Collegiate. They cater to about a hundred kids. "My partner Hernan Olaya, myself, and the volunteers work hard to help these kids develop the right attitudes so they can have success in life

through hard work."

Dale explains that the skills the kids pick up during prac-

I wanted to let kids know God made them special and people do care about them.

tice are actually life lessons. "When we first got started, these kids were swearing and had horrible attitudes, and we've used basketball to teach them discipline: being punctual, playing as a team, not as individual[s], and being encouraging, not critical. Over time you can see their character development, you start to see flashes of brilliance as they play as a team. We've seen them mature, and play like a class act." Dale has created a small manual for the youths on leadership, attitudes, discipline, vision, courage, and identity — the values that frame the program.

Dale sees potential in the kids society writes off. "We believe these kids can get into places of influence. They have personalities, charisma, strength, talents to get them into the offices and places of power; they can have an incredible impact. We hope to empower them."

The engineer believes that his work with youth is a memorial to Josiah. "When he was born, the amount of ef-



Dale Lynch and his son Joshua

fort I put in — all of me was poured into him so that he could survive, and, as strong as I thought I was, he was stronger. He's an honourable little boy. And I keep that in my heart, and when I do things it's to honour his life and his memory."

In the future, Dale and his wife Michelle will continue to work with marginalized youth, and they plan to open a community center in Josiah's name that will offer basketball programs in addi-

tion to tutoring, music, and art programs for the youth. They are also collaborating with Basketball4Life and ProAction 33 Division (Toronto Police) to create a six-team basketball league for at-risk youth.

The first season is scheduled to begin in April this year.

Nicole Georges-Bennett is mother to Justin and Dominique and is a freelance writer.

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A Legacy of Hope



Denise Bebenek at Meagan's Walk

photo by Laura Fontaine

By Samia Teclé

It was on December 22, 2000, that the lives of Denise Bebenek and her family changed forever. After months of witnessing increasing signs of abnormalities with her daughter Meagan, she took her to Sick Children's Hospital. The diagnosis was unbearable: her four-year-old daughter had an inoperable brain stem glioma. Although Denise knew something was wrong, she had never anticipated such a diagnosis. She was anxious to find out more about her daughter's condition and any possible cure. She quickly discovered that brain tumours were the leading cause of death among cancerous children. If such was the case, she expected that extensive research in the field would allow her to remain optimistic. The answer she found was not satisfying: very little research had been

done to find a cure. Immediately, Denise knew she had to do something.

Sadly, on June 17, 2001, Meagan passed away with her family by her side, never once complaining about the situation she was forced to cope with. However, Meagan left behind a glimmer of hope that would soon flourish.

Denise is a living testament showing that if we open doors, greater opportunities exist.

One day Denise thought to herself, While we wait for a cure, why not send a much needed message of love? This vision materialized, and the following year Denise founded Meagan's Walk, an organization geared to raising funds for pediatric brain cancer research. While she admits that fundraising remains essential to finding a

Rob *Cont'd from pg.3* involved in the community as we can is important; we have so many equally important issues out there like AIDS, world hunger, global warming — it's all about making the world better, so if you can get involved in anything that's really dear to your heart, then go for it,

because it's really important and that's what we are trying to teach kids."

At only 24 years old, Rob continues to prove that we can all make the world a better place. His dream and story have influenced several others to do the same, and in his own words, he has taught us to "never give up." Rob

cure, she still believes that the more important message being relayed "is one of love, courage, and compassion." Meagan's death gave birth to her legacy, which is one of hope for all children living with brain tumours.

Denise herself is always on the go — making speeches at schools to raise awareness, visiting hospitals, organizing events — but she stresses that the focus not be placed on her, but rather on the children who suffer daily from brain tumours. Furthermore, she reminds people that Meagan was just one of the many who suffered and continue to suffer from this condition.

Denise, whose drive is indefatigable, admits she would never sleep if she was able to. "There are so many people that need to hear this message, from doctors, to actors, to teachers and family members." She believes that, like Terry Fox, Meagan planted a seed while she was on earth, and she is convinced that her legacy lives on today.

The annual Meagan's Walk, which takes place on Mother's Day, is a five-kilometre event that welcomes people of all ages and abilities. Upon completion of the walk, participants join hands in a human chain, a Circle of Hope around the SickKids facility. Inspired by Meagan herself, who loved to give hugs, the human hug is a "touching and visible gesture of support for the children and their families within." Each year, the walk hosts teams that register to participate in order to celebrate "their Meagan." Whether sick or not, Denise stresses that this event is for all. "It is an opportunity to celebrate life for the gift that it is, and to use the suffering of the ill to show us just how impor-

tant it is to embrace life and give thanks for all that we have to be grateful for." This walk is just one of the many events Denise's organization hosts annually.

Admitting that a part of her left with Meagan, Denise remains very positive, realizing that she needs to be brave for the little children whom she loves. A former Catholic School Board teacher who gave up her job to spearhead this initiative, Denise feels that someone had to ignite the fight against this sickness for the children and families who continue to suffer through the same thing she did.

Denise has allowed herself to see the good that has come

out of her daughter's passing. She has taken the most agonizing of situations and, through Meagan's Walk, has reached so many in desperate need of this message of love, hope, and compassion. Balancing Meagan's Walk and her responsibilities to her family, she is a hero. Denise is a living testament showing that if we open doors, greater opportunities exist. "Everyone comes to this earth with a gift; if everyone offered their expertise, it is amazing what this earth would look like."

Samia Teclé is an International Development Studies and Political Science student at York University.

Mark Millard is a second-year Media Arts student

Children's Heroes

Project of Louis-Honoré Frechette Public School

My Hero

My hero is my dad. He is very hard working and he is always willing to help with anything. For example, even if he's sick he still works. Also he fixes graphics for example if a game has bad graphics he can double the graphics. For my birthday he got me on

CTV television by taking a picture of me to the CTV building in downtown. I know he is the one who cherishes me the most. That's why he is my favourite person in the world. He is a workaholic but since he loves me so much he always finds time to play with me.

My dad is also very patient. He took the time off from work to teach me soccer even though I continued to make mistakes, he continued to show me how to do it correctly. He always tells me "practice makes perfect."

-Andrew N., Grade 4

My Hero

My hero is my English teacher, Ms. Freedman. She inspires me to be an English instructor when I grow up because the work that she gives us is really fun. When I was behind in class, she helped so much by mailing a chart in my agenda, that day, during recess, she gave up her time to get me organized. I'm

sure that thanks to Ms. Freedman, I'll be organized for the rest of the year. Ms. Freedman is very friendly and makes each class exciting by letting me read to the class. Every day, in the morning, I can't wait to go to English class because I know that there will be something breathtaking to do. When we are

doing a test, she always hopes that the class will do well. She is patient when we are working and if we make a mistake, she doesn't really care. She just tells me to try harder. Ms. Freedman is really hard working, optimistic and very, very helpful. I am so happy that I have a teacher like her.

-Claire M., Grade 4

My Heroes

My heroes are my parents. My parents always do something for me whether it's bringing me somewhere or making me dinner. If I'm sick they will stay at home just for me. They bring me to this child care when we have to wake up early, so my par-

ents have to wake me up. They drive me everywhere. They are always pleasant to me. Without them, I wouldn't even be living. My parents are trustworthy because when they make a promise, they keep it. If I ever get hurt, my parents take action immediately. My

parents are optimistic. If they have goals they shall do whatever they have to do to achieve them. My parents let me make mistakes and instead of yelling at me, they teach me how to learn from my mistakes.

-Filip I., Grade 4

My Heroes

My heroes are my parents. They make my food, they take care of me and they provide me with shelter like my house. They help me with my homework and they drive me places like soccer practice and my math classes. They work really hard to help

me and my brother. When they have the chance to stay home with me, like on a P.A. day, they take that chance and they stay home with me. They make a lot of sacrifices to help me and my brother. My mom works really hard because she is an office man-

ager and my dad also works really hard because he is an electric engineer. They work for a pretty long time but they try to make sure that they finish their work early enough to get home and spend time with me.

-Max R., Grade 4



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"My students were so thrilled to share their everyday heroes in their articles. Character Education at our school really helped my students recognize outstanding individuals who have been both influential and supportive in their development. Thank you for your encouragement!"

- Erica Freedman,
Grade 4 Teacher

My Hero

My hero is my ballet teacher, Nadia Veselova. She is a famous ballerina from Russia. Nadia is my hero because she has inspired me to continue in dance and work harder. Her strict ways really have me thinking and have helped me become a true ballerina at heart. She puts her time aside to teach people. She is very patient. When we get something wrong, she takes time to teach us until we get it right, even if it

means taking 30 minutes telling me where to keep my arms. She believes in me and I appreciate that very much. Nadia is very understanding. If you have a problem and you tell her, she will help you solve it. Now, when I hold a glass of water or juice, I'm so used to holding my fingers like a ballerina, that my pinky doesn't touch the cup. Nadia has been very kind, that's why she is my hero.

-Lauren R., Grade 4

My HEROES

My heroes are my parents. They are my heroes because they help me with my homework (mostly my dad). He helps me with my projects and helps me study for my tests. My mom usually drives me to school and back home every day. My mom is an artist and I like all her paintings. She has really inspired me. So when I grow up I want to be an artist or a doctor. Whenever I ask my mom for something, she often gets it for me. They are also my heroes because they gave me a house to live in, they made me

and they give me food to eat. If I'm sick, my parents usually cancel whatever they need to do for that day. They are always there when I need them. They are generous, loving and caring. For example, they wake me up in the morning so I will be on time for school, they drive me to my friend's house and they give me kisses and hugs. They protect me if anything bad happens to me. I love my parents a lot and they love me.

-Maya K., Grade 4

MY HERO

My hero is my dad because he inspired me and other people to be a doctor like him. My dad helps me and other people in need by making sacrifices. For example, sometimes I'm about to see him, but he has to work so we have to see him another day. If I'm having trouble with my homework, he's always there to help solve my problems. He also takes risks to save other people.

He works in the emergency room. My dad is optimistic, hopeful and positive when he is about to rescue someone. My dad is brave. He sets goals and achieves them. If my dad cures someone, he experiences success. My dad will always protect me, my sister, and the rest of the family. My dad is intelligent in almost every subject. He is my hero!

-Sam P., Grade 4

Elmer Comes of Age

By Rick Ross

Most of us remember learning about traffic safety as children from Elmer the Safety Elephant®. These days, however, “safety” has taken on an expanded meaning, including the dangers of the internet and illicit drugs.

The School Liaison Officer, Police Constable Gary Wright of the Toronto Police Services’ 32 Division, still delivers Elmer’s traffic safety message to the lower grades, but now he also talks to the higher grades about drugs and safety in the digital age. It used to be that the biggest problems in school were chewing gum and talking in class. Now the problems include drugs, gangs, bullying, and abuse on the internet. This change has resulted in Constable Wright’s elementary school visits including as many senior classes as junior and primary classes.

Officer Gary, as he prefers to be called by the children, starts out by setting the class at ease, answering all their questions about his job and the equipment he carries on his belt. “You have to develop a rapport with the kids if they are truly going to hear your message,” says Officer Gary. There are no holds barred. He shares his experiences freely in a wide-rang-

ing discussion that covers the gamut from how many people he has arrested to how the police respond to various situations, including violent ones. One popular topic is just how unrealistic the CSI shows are. By describing the work of the Toronto Po-

lice Services’ forensic unit, the class gets a better sense of reality. The presentation, which was requested by the teacher, is highly interactive, encouraging the participation of all the students. Officer Gary does not just come and lecture. What makes his presentations so special is the way he incorporates a multi-media approach. On a

few occasions, he has even brought in a police volunteer who is also a magician to help illustrate some points. When discussing the dangers of the internet, he uses an age-appropriate video and follows it up with a free-ranging discussion. In his

what happens in an arrest. His role-playing approach makes a significant impact on everyone in the class. Officer Gary doesn’t just go through the motions in delivering the material. Maybe it is because he is a father himself, but he really cares about kids and it

with the information they needed to make intelligent decisions about staying safe on the internet and understanding the risks associated with street drugs. In the first session, his students learned about the precautions they needed to take in order to protect their identity, and how not to become victims of pedophiles and other predators. In the second session, they were introduced to the physical, emotional, and financial risks involved in experimenting with drugs. David says, “In this age of the sound bite, attention spans are very short, but I really believe Officer Gary was able to get through to my class.”

“If my visits can keep one child off drugs, or keep one kid safe on the internet, or stop one kid from being bullied, then it is all worthwhile,” says Officer Gary. Today’s young people are the future of our nation, and if Officer Gary has anything to do with it, that future will be as bright as the reflection on his badge when the sunlight pours through the classroom window.



Police Constable Gary Wright with his attentive students

On a substance-abuse sessions he shows a display board with samples of what the different drugs look like. He uses this as a springboard to talk about the health and financial costs associated with using drugs. These are factors many students do not think about. One of the most powerful parts of his message is when he walks the kids through

shows in everything he does. He ends his presentation by saying, “The last thing in the world I want to see is one of you kids in a cell at the police station.” Toronto District School Board teacher David Ross was so impressed with the approach that he invited Officer Gary to address his class on two separate sessions to provide his students

with the information they needed to make intelligent decisions about staying safe on the internet and understanding the risks associated with street drugs. In the first session, his students learned about the precautions they needed to take in order to protect their identity, and how not to become victims of pedophiles and other predators. In the second session, they were introduced to the physical, emotional, and financial risks involved in experimenting with drugs. David says, “In this age of the sound bite, attention spans are very short, but I really believe Officer Gary was able to get through to my class.”

Rick Ross is a retired engineer, professional magician, and volunteer with Junior Achievement and Toronto Police Services.

Children’s Cont’d from pg. 6

My Hero

My hero is my grandfather, He is so great to me because he is one of the people who have been with me every step of the way. My grandfather is and always will be there for me. He is there if I want to call him on the phone and when I need someone to talk to he will always say something positive about the subject and he’ll make me laugh. He is very intelligent. He’s a generous person. For example, I love wearing baggy pyjama pants. My grandpa itic gives me pairs

of his new pyjama pants if he has a new pair that he thinks I will like. He’ll offer me a pair to keep! He is also optimistic, intelligent and hard-working. He is seventy-two and he still works at a place where you don’t sit for too long. He has been working making light fixtures for over 40 years. I don’t know what I would do without my grandfather. To me, he is a real hero.

-Tamara H., Grade 4

My Hero

My hero is my mom. She’s my hero because she always helps me. Whether it’s homework or giving me advice, she’s always there for me. For example, sometimes if I’m sick, my mom takes time off work to be with me. She’s always there to protect me. She’s helpful, loving and caring. For example, if there’s not enough food to eat, she goes out and buys more or she gives me some of hers. Even if my mom doesn’t have lots of money with her she still tries to buy

me something. She’s very generous, hard working and sometimes my mom works late at the hair salon. My mom is very clever because she always knows what’s best and always knows what to do. She always stands up for me. I love my mom so much and I’ll always cherish her because she means everything to me. She will always love me a lot and she’ll always cherish me.

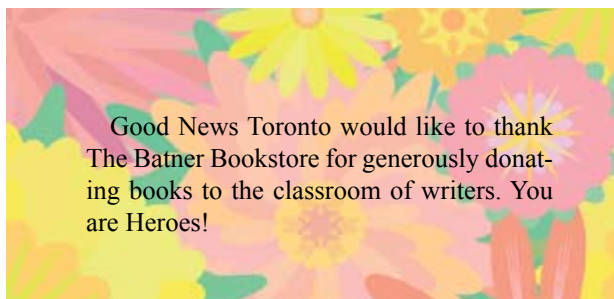
- Sarah D., Grade 4

My Hero

My hero is dad. He is my hero because he is loving and caring. He’s very protective and if I get hurt he helps me. My dad is super brave and takes a lot of risks. My dad is a mover, so he often risks pulling a muscle or hurting himself when he moves people’s furniture. My hero is generous. For example, he buys me a lot of toys and clothes and cooks for me. He’s very intelligent and I know that because when he helps me with my homework, he knows all the an-

swers. My dad helps me and my siblings solve our problems. He makes sacrifices for me like if I need help, he stops what he’s doing to help me or my family. My dad is strong in both ways. He is strong in his heart and in his arms (muscles). He is very hard working because he has to go on long trips to do his job. But he gets a lot of days off. My hero is my dad.

- Natasha P., Grade 4



Good News Toronto would like to thank The Batner Bookstore for generously donating books to the classroom of writers. You are Heroes!

Monthly Feature “My Hero”



“My everyday hero is Mavis Staines, Artistic Director of Canada’s National Ballet School. I admire her ability to remain calm and composed no matter what pressures she faces in the daily running of a large institution.”

Karen Kain

Karen Kain, an international artist of the first rank and an ambassador for her art form, is the Artistic Director of The National Ballet of Canada. Under her leadership, the company successfully moved into a new era and performance venue, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, in 2006. The National Ballet of Canada will perform in Cinderella from May 28 to June 8, 2008 and the summer mixed programme from June 13 to June 22, 2008.

Ending World Hunger, One Grain at a Time...

By Rosa Soo Young Park

Who would have ever thought that playing an online game could help donate rice to hungry people? An award-winning online vocabulary game www.freerice.com does just that.

When you go to the site, you can start playing the game immediately simply by picking the right meaning of the word presented at the top. Once a player clicks on a correct word, 20 grains of rice are donated.

Addictive in nature, more than half a million people have been playing the game every day since its launch in October 2007.

Freerice.com was designed by a computer programmer, John Breen, who runs the site at no cost. The rice donations are sponsored by advertisers whose logos appear at the bottom of the screen. Freerice.com then turns the advertising profit over to the



United Nations’ World Food Program, who delivers the rice to those who need it.

According to the World Food Program website, over 20,000 people, including refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, pregnant women in Cambodia, children in Uganda, and Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, have received rice as a result of people playing on freerice.com. By mid-March of 2008, grains of rice numbering 23,753,890,690 had been



donated. Each day, more than 25,000 people die of hunger around the world. So don’t just sit there. Start playing.

Rosa Soo Young Park is a freelance journalist based in Toronto



Small Things We Can Do To Make A Change

- Smile at someone
- Plant something – a flower, a bush, a tree
- Spend some time just listening to someone
- Unplug your electronics when you are not using it
- Research one of the charities/causes in Good News Toronto that interests you the most and get involved

Please share the GOOD NEWS - pass it on!

Nikita Syriopoulos: Oasis' Ambassador to the Danforth!

By Kevin Meade

Nikita Syriopoulos was born in Greece during World War II. He immigrated here with his wife in 1967, and his cousin took them in and helped get them settled. Soon after, they got their own home, but it was a very different world from Greece.

Nikita went to night school and then worked in real estate for over 23 years. He enjoyed that job, setting his own hours, being his own boss. But he also started drinking more — a few drinks with friends, or a drink with his clients to celebrate a successful sale. Soon he was going to the clubs almost every night, and was usually the last to leave. His wife told him that he had changed.

Their son was born in 1973, and within one year of this, Nikita's wife was diagnosed with cancer. The thought of losing her was nearly too much for Nikita to bear. A doctor recommended marijuana to his wife to "relax" and deal with the terrible strain of her treatments. She chose not to use it, but Nikita did. At this time, he only drank when she was in hospital. The doctors gave his wife six months to live, but she survived for six years. After her death in 1980, Nikita drank on a daily basis. He managed to work steadily for the next 14 years, but he got heavily into cocaine for a while, and

ended up passing out and in the hospital several times. In 1992, he started adding pills to the mix. He tried to hide his addiction, but within his own community people were aware of his problem, particularly his son, who was on the verge of leaving home because he couldn't stand to see what was happening. Nikita begged him to stay, and he agreed — providing Ni-

Through the building of Oasis and by helping others, Nikita found that he was becoming a different and better person, and he was also starting to feel better about himself.

kita would seek help. "Only one thing kept me from going too far: my son," Nikita says.

On a Greek radio program, Nikita had heard about Oasis, the Danforth-based support and retraining centre for recovering drug addicts and alcoholics. One of the founders, Takis Liris, and another member were talking about alcoholism. Nikita remembered listening to them and feeling sorry for them; he was still in denial about his own substance-abuse problems. Soon after, Takis came to talk with him. Nikita lis-

tened carefully and then said, "If you are an alcoholic, then I'm one too." Takis asked him if he needed help, and Nikita told him yes. He had no other options. He went with Takis to Alcoholics Anonymous, and they started working together to expand Oasis.

The struggle to build Oasis took years. There was always a shortage of funds, but never a shortage of people coming for help. It was a constant worry to pay the rent. Yet somehow it always managed to stay afloat.

Nikita returned to school and obtained an Addiction Degree from McMaster University. Through the building of Oasis and by helping others, Nikita found that he was becoming a different and better person, and he was also starting to feel better about himself.

After McMaster, Nikita returned to Greece and worked with the Sociology Department at the University of Salonika from 2003 to 2005, telling them about Oasis. They put together a pilot project, funded by the Greek Government, to re-create the Oasis Recovery Model there. As a result, their graduate students now know more about addictive behaviour patterns, and there is a place on Salonika's Campus where students can "learn by doing," and where both students and troubled people can get help.

It has been over 14 years since Nikita started on what



Nikita Syriopoulos

he calls his "new life." He now has both his dignity and his self-respect. He is working hard on something that he truly believes in. His com-

better — in fact, he now has a grandson and granddaughter! Nikita believes that recovery from addiction is possible, no matter how far down the scale you have been.

Yes, recovery from drugs and alcohol is difficult, yet it is possible. Nikita Syriopoulos is a walking example for the whole Danforth community!

Kevin Meade has been involved in Drug & Alcohol recovery support work for 15 years. He updated and adapted this from an original story written by Leslie Hobson.

Nikita believes that recovery from addiction is possible, no matter how far down the scale you have been

mitment to Oasis has given him a focus for his life, and he is concentrating on what really matters in this world — people. His relationship with his son has never been

Seven

By Susie Petersiel Berg

I let you out of my life every morning into calendar time, book buddies, math tests.

you don't have to choose whether to be mine.

All day you are you among sevens, collecting the whispered clues, secret keys that create you apart from me, the words you hear from the other girls:
I go first – called it locked it put it in my pocket

You return with the wind at the end of the day let the door swing and slam,

gather me in plump kisses and streams of story.

We play Crazy Eights, and you test:
I go first – called it locked it put it in my pocket

no one mocks, you put down the first card, release your breath: chalk one up for you.

I see you on my way past the playground, keep my head down while you wait your turn at four-square;

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Nikita Syriopoulos and co-workers Dave Soroka and Dimitri Grigorakis outside the newly-renovated OASIS building at 921 Danforth.



Susan Agasee: Dedicated for 37 Years

By Andy Réti

It takes a special kind of person to look after people with special needs. In the old days, they were called “retarded” or “handicapped.” Society was not as accepting or aware as it is today. Susan Agasee was one of the many dedicated individuals who changed that and made us aware of the special people among us.

Susan’s story started when she responded to an advertisement asking for volunteers in a nursery for retarded (the word she doesn’t like) children. Without any experience, Susan started working with severely handicapped children from nine months old up to age twelve. She found it fascinating and rewarding. Because of her background it was a natural fit: she had an affinity for handicapped children due to her own trauma as a child Holocaust survivor. She feels that God was a guiding light for her, but the loss of six million people still haunts her. Along the way, she took

training and received her Early Childhood Education (ECE) certificate and took night courses about mental retardation. Originally from Poland, she was only two years old when she lost her parents. After the war she came to Canada, got married, and raised two daughters with her husband, who is very supportive of her work and involvement.

The Kadima (meaning forward) group that she is connected with is part of Beth Emeth Synagogue, organized by Rabbi Kellman. The group consists of twenty-five to thirty people, with developmentally handicapped adults over eighteen years. The oldest in the group is eighty-five years old and has been there from the time Susan started. The day this interview was conducted they had their Tuesday Supper Club meeting. Goldie and Martin (pictured) just couldn’t contain their enthusiasm for Susan and the program. Goldie thinks that “Susan is very sweet,” and Martin loves helping out with the supper



Susan Agasee (centre) with Martin and Goldie at the Tuesday Supper Club

club. Susan is always looking for programs and activities for the group, such as going on picnics, bowling, going to Canada’s Wonderland, and going to the Famous People Theatre. Usually they have a large group for these outings and volunteer chaperones from B’nai Brith’s Leonard Mayzel Lodge come and help. Susan’s philosophy is

that one should never look at disability, but at ability. These individuals should be part of the community, not in an institution. Susan feels that she gets a lot of satisfaction out of her volunteering and couldn’t have found such fulfillment anywhere else. She encourages other people to get involved because, as she says, “If we can

better the [lives] of people we work with, it is the greatest reward.” Susan’s future plans are to continue doing what she does and encouraging others to get involved.

Andy Reti is a retired pensioner involved in writing, lecturing about the Holocaust, and motorcycling.

More *Cont’d from pg. 1*

Leukemia is most commonly referred to as a cancer of the blood.

Characterized by the widespread uncontrolled propagation of large numbers of abnormal blood cells, it takes over the bone marrow, and quickly spreads to the blood stream.

It accounts for about 33% of cancer cases in children under the age of one up to age fourteen.

Each fundraising event has the same mission: to “Give from the heart,” raise awareness of this unbiased disease, and honour a young boy for his valour. Asking friends and family, and relying on the community to come together, the children receive pledges to dance. Each year they have a different theme. Clad in multicultural dress, the students reflect their latest, “Around the World.”

“He loved to dance, so this means a lot. He’d be so happy,” says Emily, his younger sister, who is now a grade eight student attending Father Serra. She points to

a banner, which she created this year in his honour, hanging in the gym. “He was always dancing, or swimming, or going to boy scouts ... He just loved life.”

And so the students celebrate it, and while perspiration drips from their cheeks, Gerri remarks on the difference they are helping to make.

“Each year we’ve raised more than the last, and each year the stats become more amazing for those diagnosed with leukemia. The survival rate is well on the rise.”

With awareness-raising comes dramatic improvement. Studies show that survival rates for children with acute lymphocytic leukemia have increased from 53% to 87% since the mid-1970s. Now, re-read that last sentence, but put statistics aside. Instead, think of the children who can continue to love life. Think: one more cub-scout meeting, one more dip in the pool, one more dance that they may never have seen.

One of last year’s top earners, grade eight student

Madeline Asarb, says, “It just feels better to give. My mom’s brother passed away from leukemia, so that motivated me. I will be back next year, even though I won’t go here anymore. I want to volunteer for the dance-a-thon. It’s just a great thing, uniting to help.” Standing near the entrance to the doorway of the gymnasium is a bearded man, who appears wise and caring. “That is Mr. MacRory. He was Ian’s teacher the year he passed.” Gerri calls him over, as she continues to remark on his significance in the story.

“He’s been growing that thing for thirty-seven years!” She laughs as he strokes his well-hidden chin.

Cherishing his last moments with it, Brian MacRory is preparing to shave his beard to help the school reach this year’s goal of \$16,000. “He was a great kid,” he says, still stroking his beard.

Ian’s sister can’t think of her single happiest moment with her older brother. “There were just too many!”

You can see she’s searching, but one in particular won’t come to mind.

Perhaps this is because he hasn’t left just one memory. Rather, he helped create unity between a community, and the incredible dedication of the teachers and students at Father Serra Catholic School has helped create so many more, for so many others.

Note: On April 30, Gerri Lucia telephoned Good News Toronto to inform us that Brian MacRory was now beardless.

Thanks to the pledges received combined with the avid fundraising of the students, Father Serra Catholic School reached their goal this year of \$16,000.

Congratulations to those who collected, those who danced, and, most especially, those who donated — from the heart.

Robin Bond is a mother, freelance writer, and aspiring author

Louise *Cont’d from pg. 1*

if the first W.A.V.E. event would be funded and could take place there! Under these conditions, the first Walk Against Violence Everywhere took place in May 2006, and has been going strong each year since. In 2006, participants raised \$45,000, which was then used towards five awards worth \$2,000 each to recognize young people who have worked toward making their communities a safer place. These awards continue and W.A.V.E. is currently accepting nominations.

Louise Russo’s actions are making a positive mark on Toronto youths, and thus Toronto’s future.

Good News Toronto would like to thank Louise Russo for her strength and courage; she is truly an amazing woman.

Kate De Freitas is a freelance writer

Knocking Out Abuse

By Jennifer Sanasie

Passion and dedication are two of the qualities that define Jen Plyler. A 28-year-old woman who lives in the west end of Toronto, Jen is making positive change for the people in her community on a daily basis. She is currently involved with the Shape Your Life Boxing Project, an initiative working to give women and trans-gendered people, focussing primarily on survivors of violence, confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment through the sport of boxing.

Shape Your Life holds the boxing classes at the Toronto Newsgirls facility in Toronto, but it is a project jointly run by Toronto Newsgirls Boxing Club, Opportunity for Advancement, Jessie's Centre for Teenagers, and Brock University. Jen is the coordinator for this project, and when she speaks about Shape Your Life, it is clear that she has great passion for what she does.

"I help the women with whatever they need; if anything is going on in the rest of their lives, I'm there," Jen says.

Savoy Howe, the owner of Toronto Newsgirls, only has great things to say about Jen: "She makes herself available to the participants outside of office hours, connecting them

with counselling services, housing opportunities, and food banks. She even filled four lockers at the gym with sneakers and workout clothes of all sizes so that participants always have access to working out."

Jen has been working with survivors of violence for ten years. She is motivated by her own struggles in abusive relationships, and she uses her experience to reach out to others, letting them know that they are not alone.

"I help the women with whatever they need; if anything is going on in the rest of their lives, I'm there"

Jen is an example for these women to look up to. She escaped her abusive past, and is now living in a house shared with four other survivors of violence. "It is important to get out of the violence," she said. "There is a cycle of homelessness when it comes to leaving a home." Women leave abusive homes and end up on the street, and Jen is fighting to find these women a stable environment in which to live.

Last June, along with three other women, Jen took over an abandoned Jamestown building in order to show the

community that there was unused space that could be turned into safe housing for victims of violence. During this takeover, 150 women and children marched towards the abandoned house in an effort to create awareness in the community. Jen was successful in alerting people to the growing situation.

"I really believe in working in the community that I live in," Jen said. "It's really about figuring out locally what the problems are and coming up with positive solutions."

Jen is the Community Development Coordinator at the Stop Community Food Centre, a space where people are encouraged to come together to access and learn about healthy food. The Stop Community Food Centre also has a garden that gives people in the community a spot to grow their own healthy food. They also have a community kitchen where people can learn to cook as well as eat and socialize; it also offers a food bank.

"It's all about looking for ways to help plug a community into social change," Jen says.

Jen's work within her community not only gives her self-fulfillment, but everyone whom she touches is also affected by her positive energy. Just sitting outside with her on the terrace of a small



Jen Plyler determined to help her community.
Photo by in/vision productions.

coffee shop I could feel this energy beating through the sun rays as she spoke. I could feel the empowerment and motivation, I could feel the dedication, and I knew that Jen was a person that anyone could look up to.

She is able to inspire anyone. "There are so many ways to struggle for human rights, and they're all important; whether it be at your job, or civil disobedience, it's all important," she told me with conviction.

Jen is a true hero to her community, and fuels her passion with rage for injustice. "I will be angry to the point of tears my whole life, and if not, I've burnt out," she says with fervour. She will always be making change and fighting for equality. Jen is clearly an individual who has dedicated her life to helping people in the city find their place.

Jennifer Sanasie is a Toronto-based freelance writer



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