

Community Comes together to Support Family

by Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation



"Parents of very sick children have to live each day, hour by hour taking care of all of their child's needs. Thinking about the long term would be too daunting, therefore the parents should not have to worry about paying for expensive drugs and travel costs. That is where family and friends can help." With those words, the inspiration for organizing several fundraising events to help a good friend in need came to Tanya Bonham. She and her husband, Jeff, are galvanizing friends, neighbours and anyone who can relate to the feelings being the parents of a child struck down with a serious illness must experience.

Life changed for the Gillies family, Rebecca Ryan, Steve and Ella Gillies, in late November while they were on an annual visit to Boston for the American Thanksgiving weekend. They were thankful to be able to get quick medical attention when Ella complained of leg pains. The diagnosis of Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL) came almost immediately. "We're still in shock" says Becky, Ella's Mom. It was almost hard to believe their lives could be turned upside down in an instant. "A child who has leukemia changes your lives" she adds. Fortunately, with early detection and treatment, the prognosis is good, albeit with an intervening two years of treatment lying ahead. The close-knit family of three lived right in the hospital, staying at Ella's bedside round the clock almost a month, returning home last week, much to Ella's delight.

While they were in Boston, close friends, family and neighbours hastily came together under Bonham's leadership to plan how they could help. Bonham can relate to the Gillies family as the Mom of four year old Carly, a friend of Ella's. They both attend Rothesay

Nursery School. It was determined that a family skating party would be an appropriate affair for all ages to participate, with all proceeds going to support the Gillies.

Family and friends have joined forces with the Bonhams as they plan a series of community events in support of the Gillies family. With collaboration "Ella's Purple Posse" t-shirts were designed, perfect since purple is Ella's favourite color. Martin Flewwelling donated a large photograph of Ella for fundraising events which was taken at the Nursery School. The first family skate took place December 18 at Harbour Station and was an outstanding success, raising about \$3,400. A second similar event, complete with face painting, balloon animals, prizes and refreshments is slated for Saturday, January 8, 10-11am at Rothesay Netherwood Arena. Volunteers and of course participants, are needed for it and a third fundraiser taking shape later this winter. Potentially, it will be an adults night out which will include a silent auction as the main fundraising activity. Auction donations are welcome anytime. A gentlemen's poker night is also in the works for February 26, at the Renforth Bill McGuire Centre, again with proceeds helping address Ella's drug, travel and related treatment expenses. Jeff Bonham and John Oxley are organizing this event.

Becky, a stay at home mom, is overwhelmed with the efforts underway on their behalf as they ponder how to thank everyone adequately. "It makes you realize how good people are" she states. The Gillies have high praise for Bonham and her volunteers. "She is an amazing organizer, beyond being a good friend, it's unbelievable" she adds, knowing Bonham had already helped galvanize support for another family in need. "How many people would step up and coordinate all this"? she adds. The Gillies are overwhelmed by all the support, love and prayers from family, friends and neighbours.

The Rothesay branch of Scotiabank has agreed to open an "in trust" account for the cause. Meanwhile, Ella will be travelling to the IWK in Halifax right after Christmas and in the new year, as well as receiving treatment here at the Saint John Regional Hospital, as she moves along the road to recovery with support from her family, many friends and neighbours.

To volunteer or donate contact Tanya Bonham 847-4202, tanya.bonham@nb.sympatico.ca



Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880, sjfoundation@nb.aibn.com. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca