

Liver Foundation Raising Profile of Deadly Disease

By Jane Barry, The Greater Saint John Community Foundation

Young, attractive, starting out on a promising career, Kristen Wheaton looked like a “poster child” for a health charity. Out of the blue, as she underwent routine tests, something seemed amiss. Further testing confirmed she showed early signs of a rare form of an auto-immune liver disease, called Primary Sclerosing Cholangitis, with no explanation for why, how or where to turn next. In fact, she has become the “poster girl” for an organization to which she is dedicating her limited energy and personal efforts, as she awaits a new liver. The poster promotes the



Liver Health Awareness Month brought interested members of the community together to show support for the cause while raising funds for research, education and prevention of liver disease among Canadians. The Rockwood Park event attracted members and supporters of the Canadian Liver Foundation's new Saint John Chapter pictured above. Photo: Submitted

need for being an organ donor. “I’m now 27 years old and when I was diagnosed at 23 I didn’t know anything about Liver Disease or its symptoms. With the support of my family and friends, I know I will make it through a transplant. I want to join others in the goal of finding a cure for these life altering diseases” she states. She hopes her story will inspire others to get involved in a new local group and to learn more about liver disease for the sake of their own health and their families.

Public education and awareness are two imperatives for the Canadian Liver Foundation (CLF). Its mandate is to promote liver health and to reduce the incidence and impact of all liver disease. To achieve this goal, the CLF works through volunteers like

Wheaton and chapters across the country to heighten understanding of liver health and liver disease, raise funds for research and education programs. Kristen runs NB's only volunteer-based Saint John chapter from home, with support from an 8 member board.

March is Liver Health Awareness Month prompting Wheaton to bring interested members of the community together to show support for the CLF. She was very pleased with the turnout for a guided walk through Rockwood Park trails. Thanks to Day Tripping and the Atlantic Superstore Millidgeville Market, over \$1,000 was raised.

This was her second event since activating the new CLF chapter, which she chairs. By challenging the community to hunt, geo-cache, climb and paddle to help people with liver disease and their families last summer in Rockwood Park, “The Amazing Chase for Liver Race” has encouraged new volunteers.

Kristen has set her sights on being part of the "Give'r for Liver" marathon team this fall in Greece. The CLF, in partnership with the Running/Walking Room, provides training to team members wanting to fundraise for liver health while participating in national and international marathons. “I am looking forward to forming new friendships and feeling the satisfaction of finishing a marathon while at the same time raising funds for research and increasing awareness of liver disease” she adds.

An avid kayaker and paddler, Wheaton says a May “Paddle for Parts” is in the works slated for the long weekend at Meehan's Cove. Amazingly, she is also promoting a raffle for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and a dinner later this year which will feature knowledgeable experts in the field of liver health. All this while carrying a cell phone and pager 24/7 in hopes of receiving that magic call that a liver is available for transplanting.

The liver is the largest internal organ in the human body and performs over 500 vital functions such as purifying the blood, removing toxins from the body and making enzymes. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and comes in several viral forms with a wide range of symptoms and causes, with only a fraction of them preventable by vaccine. Those infected may not be aware until it is very advanced. Cirrhosis means advanced scarring of the liver. The CLF recommends patients with cirrhosis and hepatitis B should be screened by ultrasound regularly for early detection and treatment of liver cancer.

One in ten Atlantic Canadians suffer from some form of liver disease. It can strike all ages: newborns, children, women and men with equal and sometimes fatal consequences and comes in over 100 forms. A common myth is that it only affects those who may abuse alcohol and drugs. A blood test for liver enzymes is one of the most basic preliminary tests.

With no cure and few treatments, transplants offer hope to those suffering from liver disease. 653 Canadians are waiting up to 3 years for livers, 18 of them New Brunswickers. Signing your Medicare card agreeing to be an organ donor and communicating your wishes to your family helps. The CLF supports the concept of “presumed consent for organ donation”, making accessibility of organs for transplants much broader.

Nationally, CLF programs and services like “Living with Liver Disease” information sessions for patients, family, friends and caregivers, LIVERight™ community and university campus presentations and the 1-800 Liver Health Information Line for diagnosed patients and referrals to community resources are making a difference.

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