

'Raffi's Rebels' organize online fundraiser to help family of 14-year-old cancer patient

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

Four Bolton moms have joined forces to bring the Caledon community together in support of a local teen battling through his final stages of cancer.

Raffaele, nicknamed Raffi, has been fighting his battle with cancer since the age of five. When Raffi was in kindergarten, a tumour was discovered on his spinal cord. He endured regular chemotherapy trips to SickKids Hospital and surgery to remove the tumour. Three years later, at age eight, the tumour began to grow again, and Raffi underwent another surgery on his spine, followed by six more weeks of chemo.

Raffi's fight continued until age 12. Though the tumour in his spine was gone, he began suffering from chronic headaches. They were discovered to be abnormal cells in and around his spinal cord and brain. He was diagnosed with High Grade Glioma. In 2019, he underwent surgery to have a Gastrostomy Tube (GTube) fitted, which delivers necessary nutrients directly to the stomach.

In the past two years, Raffi and his family have been fighting the hardest battle yet.

Jennifer Tricoci, Dianna Cocco, Melissa De Cicco and Diane Viveiros Meglio have titled their support group 'Raffi's Rebels'. The name was created by the Scerbo family when they did a fundraising walk for SickKids a few years back.

They launched a GoFundMe fundraiser on April 19 to raise money for Raffi and his family, with a goal of \$50,000. Since then 592 people have donated, and the fundraiser has been shared over 2,000 times. A total of \$49,201 has been raised, with more donations continuing to flood in.

According to the information provided on the fundraiser, 'every day is a struggle as he is almost always in pain. He has lost so much weight that he only weighs about 50 pounds. Raffi now sleeps all day and must use the GTube to provide him with daily calories. He hears his family speak but rarely responds.'

It continues, 'They are currently living every parent's worst nightmare. They will never get to see their son graduate high school. Raffi has two sisters that will grow into adulthood without him. The Scerbo's need our support. This fund was created to help ease the financial burden they are currently bearing as they continue to provide their son the care he requires. Every donation is greatly received and goes directly to Frank and Jodi. No amount is too small.'

Within a week, the fundraiser blew up and the women were receiving non-stop responses and donations.

'When we started this, we had no idea what to expect,' said Dianna Cocco. 'Within the first 24 hours, I think we were already at \$30,000. The more people that find out, the more they share it, and everybody's been calling wanting to do wonderful things for the family in addition to donating on the GoFundMe.'

She added, 'In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, where everybody is worried about their health and their finances, for everybody to be coming together like this, is restoring my faith in humanity.'

Raffi is described to be mischievous, vibrant, and one to always be making those around him laugh. One of his passions is sports; especially hockey. As Raffi's story was being shared all around, Toronto Maple Leafs player Mitch Marner got wind of Raffi, and sent him a personal message.

But the support doesn't end there. On the Scerbo's front lawn begun a couple of supportive painted rocks to lift the local family's

spirits. The rock garden continues to grow, with bright colours and positive words of hope.

On Sunday (April 26), hundreds of people drove by the Scerbo family home with signs and support in a 25 minute 'Parade of Hope' to abide by physical distancing, but still able to show the Scerbo family that the whole community is with them.

'Raffaele, please know the community is thinking of you and your family. We all stand behind you, as you courageously continue your fight. May you draw strength from the love and support which surrounds you,' shared Dufferin-Caledon MP Kyle Seebach on his Facebook page to show his own support for Raffi.

With all that's been done and continues for Raffi, his family are extremely grateful and appreciative.

On the Raffi's Rebels Facebook page, the family wrote, 'Overwhelmed is not adequate enough to describe how we feel. Everyone's beautiful words, thoughtful gestures and every level of support that family, friends and even strangers have given us. I just hope that Raffaele can sense how he has touched so many people. We continue to read messages to him, and he is surrounded by pictures, posters, and cards that people have given him.

'Raffi, we love you; we are not ready to say goodbye'

To make a donation to support the Raffi and his family, please visit Raffi's Rebels Facebook page for more information.