



COMMUNITY

Blood drive organized for teen with leukemia

By Stephanie Hounsell
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

On the outside, Ann Occhiuzzi is doing her best to go about her normal life. But inside, well, that's a different story.

It's there that she's experiencing the gut-wrenching pain of a mother with a child whose future is uncertain. He's sick, and she can't do a thing about it.

"I'm trying to keep it together," she said. "(But) I keep thinking, 'When is this nightmare going to end?' and 'Why my child?'"

Just two months ago her 17-year-old son, Greg, was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia.

"No matter what I do, I can't make him better. That helplessness is a horrible feeling," she said.

On Thursday, Oct. 16, Miltonians will have a chance to help Greg and others like him by taking part in a blood drive being held in his honour from 1:30 to 8 p.m. at the Milton Sports Centre, 605 Santa Maria Blvd.

It's recommended people first book an appointment with Canadian Blood Services.

Greg will need lots of blood when he has a stem cell transplant next month. The procedure will see his diseased bone marrow replaced with healthy stem cells from his 11-year-old brother, Jonathan, who's a perfect match.

At the blood drive, people will also be able to find out more about the OneMatch Stem Cell and Marrow Network registry, which facilitates stem cell matches. It's where Greg would have turned had Jonathan not been a match.

It's not often that a boy gets to be a hero to his big brother.

"He's happy to be able to help his brother, but he's scared," Occhiuzzi said. "It's a huge load for an 11-year-old."

Jonathan is afraid if the transplant doesn't work, it'll be his fault, she added.

Although the family's relieved Jonathan is a match, they're far from breathing easy.

"It's not a guarantee he's going to live. He still has a hell of a fight ahead of him," his mom said.

She explained Greg will be in the hospital for six to eight weeks, first receiving an intense form of chemotherapy to kill the cancer, and then having the stem cell transplant.

They'll all be holding their breath as they wait to see if Greg's body will accept the new cells.

The past couple of months have seen Greg's life turned upside down.

When he first developed a flu-like sickness, his family didn't think it was anything rest and chicken noodle soup couldn't fix.

But then came the excruciating headaches.

When lumps the size of golf balls formed on his legs, they knew something was very wrong and rushed Greg to the hospital.

In hindsight, his mother and stepfather realize the shakes, weakness and hot and cold flashes were all symptoms of the cancer that was invading Greg's body.

Greg was diagnosed with advanced chronic myelogenous leukemia, a cancer of the white blood cells in which an abnormal chromosome, the Philadelphia chromosome, forces the body to make too many white blood cells.

The blood drive is largely the brainchild of Greg's stepfather, Zack Sariov, who couldn't sit idly by while Greg faced the battle of his life.

"I'm being totally aggressive with this," Sariov said. "When it hits home you see how crucial (donating blood) is."

He said the community has been very supportive, including local businesses.

Ill teen grateful for support

Greg, who finished Grade 11 last year at E.C. Drury, said he's grateful to Sariov for more than organizing the blood drive.

"He's an extraordinary guy," Greg said. "He's done a lot for me."

The support from Miltonians — as well as that of friends from his former city of Brampton — has also been heartening, Greg said.

"It makes you feel like 'You're gonna be all right, buddy.'"

The family is hoping the blood drive will help spread awareness about the importance of donating, and also about leukemia in general.

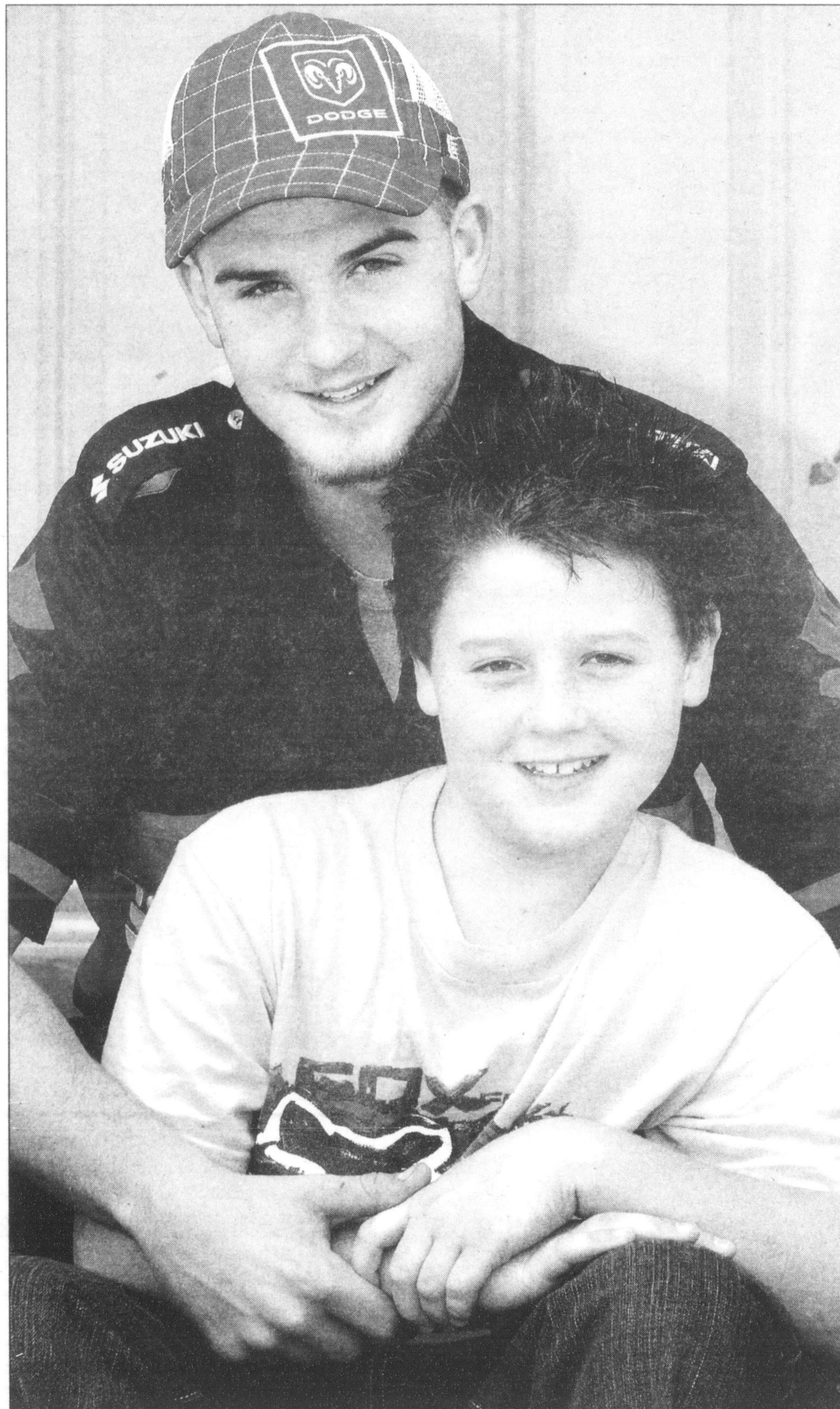
And, of course, they hope to give a huge boost to Canadian Blood Services' blood bank.

Occhiuzzi has her good days and her bad days. For now, she's focusing on the upcoming blood drive and being strong for her family, which also includes Greg's older sister, Jessica.

Her message to the community is simple: "Donate blood because you're saving a life."

To schedule an appointment, call 1-888-2-DONATE (1-888-236-6283).

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BROTHERLY LOVE: Jonathan Occhiuzzi, 11, will donate some of his stem cells next month to his older brother Greg, 17, who has leukemia.

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