

COMMUNITY

Journey of hope

Siblings travel to Poland for new MS treatment

By Stephanie Hounsell
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

For 28 years, Sonjia Vascotto watched as her brother became a prisoner in his own body, losing his ability to walk, speak and eventually even move at the greedy hands of multiple sclerosis (MS).

Last year, she engaged in a battle of her own when she was diagnosed with MS after falling to the floor in spastic convulsions. Today, she struggles with chronic fatigue, numbness in her hands and feet and dizziness.

So when Vascotto and her brother, Luciano, heard about a new treatment that's been making plenty of headlines — and creating its share of controversy — and heard the testimonials from MS patients who said they'd experienced a dramatic turnaround, they wanted to jump right onboard.

There was just one problem. The procedure hadn't yet been approved in Canada.

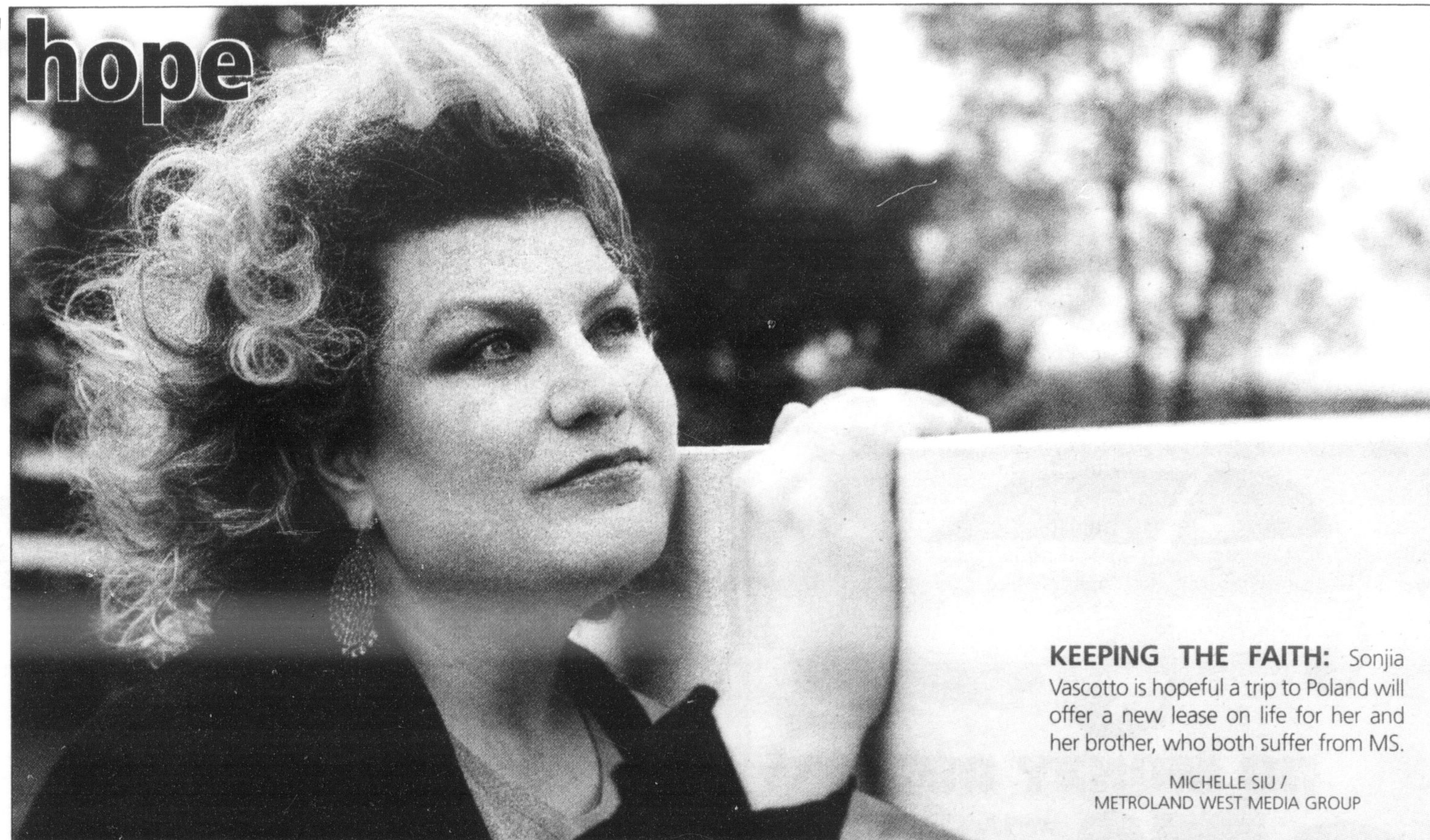
But the pair wasn't about to let geographic boundaries stop them from undergoing what they saw as a potentially life-changing treatment. Sunday, the 50-year-old brother, a Brampton resident, and 48-year-old sister, along with their mother, boarded a plane for Poland to have the endovascular procedure.

They don't have much to lose — besides a financial loss — but everything to gain, Vascotto said.

"We're going to have our lives back," said the long-time Milton resident last week. "I really and truly believe it's going to work."

Vascotto and Luciano will have the surgery over the next couple of days and return next week.

The procedure is essentially an angioplasty to open up narrowed veins in the neck. A balloon is inflated in the vein to open any blockages, allowing the blood to flow freely from



KEEPING THE FAITH: Sonjia Vascotto is hopeful a trip to Poland will offer a new lease on life for her and her brother, who both suffer from MS.

MICHELLE SIU /
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the brain. The recent surge of MS patients undergoing the treatment stems from some recent studies — the most notable done last year by Italian researcher Dr. Paolo Zamboni — that show a possible connection between MS and insufficient vein drainage (known as chronic cerebrospinal venous insufficiency, or CCSVI).

The study results left Vascotto and scores of other people with MS — an inflammatory disease of the central nervous system — incredibly optimistic. And Vascotto said she can't refute the real-life testimonials she's heard from people who've had the treatment.

But people who want it must go to the United States or abroad.

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada states on its website it's optimistic about the new research, but that, "As with any new hypothesis, there are a number of questions still to be answered."

It states a possible relationship between MS and CCSVI doesn't necessarily mean the former is caused by the latter. It recently committed \$1 million for a CCSVI clinical trial for when such a trial is approved, but continues to be criticized by many MS sufferers for not doing enough fast enough.

The MS society's stance — and that of the Canadian government — has left Vascotto and many others frustrated, believing they should be able to undergo the treatment in their own country right away.

It's Vascotto's hope the procedure will enable her brother to once again walk and talk and that her symptoms will also subside.

One of the things MS has affected is her voice. As a singer, Vascotto said she has noticed she can't sing as well as she used to because of problems with her jaw.

"I'm looking forward to getting back the voice I had when I was younger," she said.

Vascotto knows there are no guarantees of the procedure working or even that she has the sort of blockage the procedure could fix. But still she's excited.

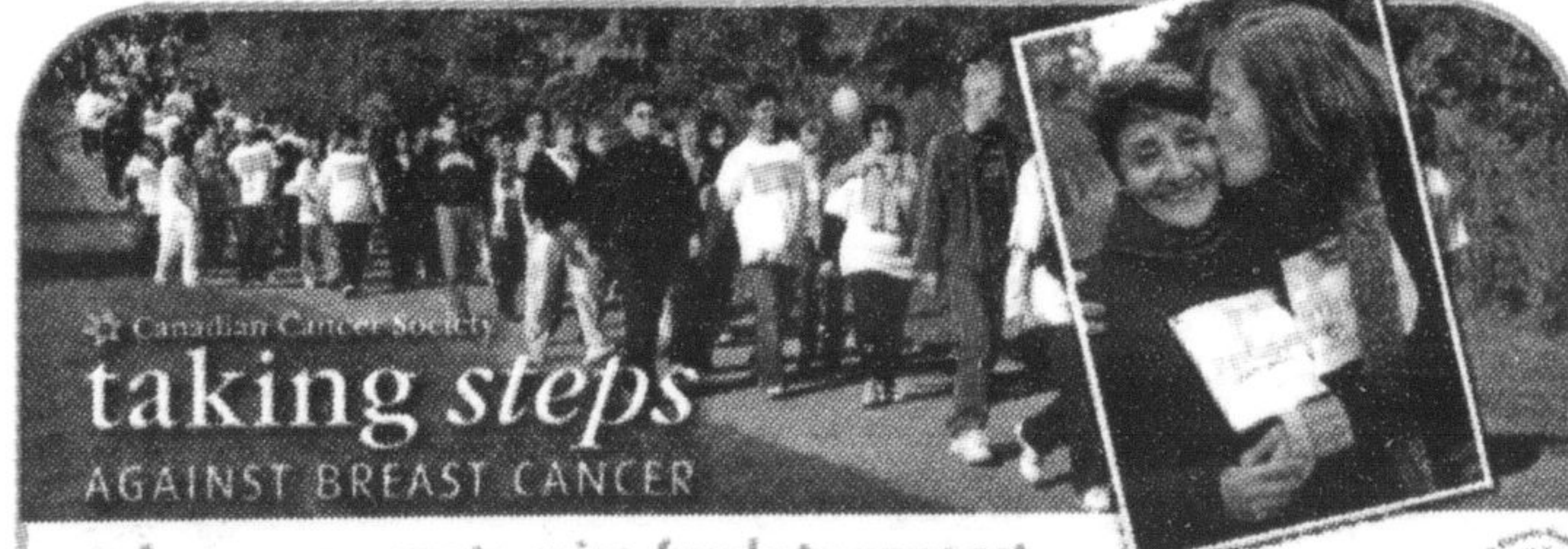
The cost for Vascotto and her brother to have the surgery, plus hotel accommodations, is about \$9,000 each. Including airfare and other expenses, the trip will cost a total of about \$30,000.

But that, she said, would be money well spent if it meant a better quality of life. Her family is in a position to be able to afford the surgery, something she realizes isn't the case for many others with the disease.

Vascotto said it's important to share her story to spread hope to other MS patients that research is indeed making strides. She hopes her excitement is infectious.

"Every time I see an article that talks about this it gives me a ray of hope."

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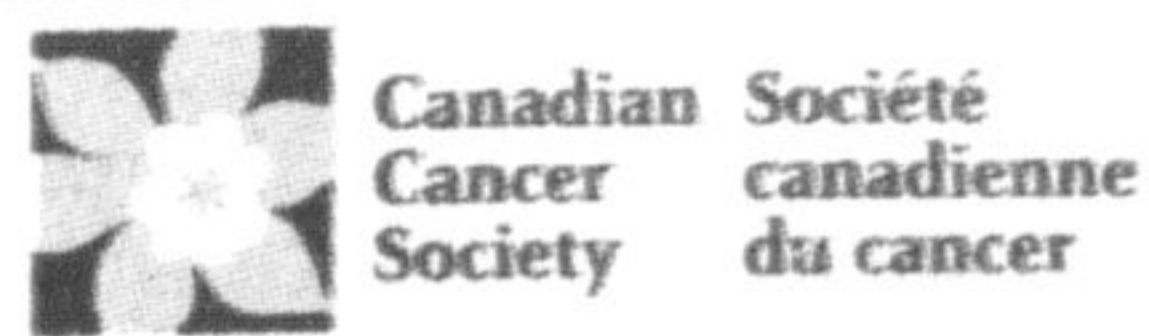
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