

# Young teen's cancer battle an inspiration to community

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Like many of her contemporaries, local teenager Karen Paisley has always enjoyed playing minor sports, being involved in her church community and taking an active part in family life.

Early in 1988, however, her world was turned upside down when she and her family learned that she was facing a life-threatening illness.

She started feeling ill, she says, on Wednesday, Jan. 20. "My stomach felt twisted and swollen, but I went ahead and played a volleyball game that night."

Though she still felt unwell the next day, she opted to go to school because she didn't want to miss writing a French test.

"Mom asked me to phone if I still felt the same way after the test," she said in an interview. "She picked me up and took me to the doctor's office. When he pressed on my stomach I suddenly got really sick and turned white. I thought I would faint."

"Her blood pressure went right up and she just turned limp," recalls her mother, Margaret. The doctor called an ambulance and Karen was taken to the emergency ward at Newmarket Hospital, where she was given blood transfusions and an intravenous in each arm.

"The doctors didn't know what they were looking for," Karen said. "They did an ultrasound and said they could see there was something inside me."

Adds Margaret, "they told (Margaret's husband) Dave and I there was a large growth and that it could be cancer. They didn't know exactly where it was. They told us she was so ill, it was a matter of life and death."

After a two and a half hour operation, the doctors removed one of Karen's ovaries.

"They told us that the pain had started because the growth had begun to press on her other organs," Margaret said. "There were no other symptoms."

By that stage, states Margaret, "it was the size of a small football. They said they'd have to do a biopsy of what they'd removed."

Despite the seriousness of the operation, Karen was walking with help just two days later.

"Five days afterwards, they told us right away that it was cancer and that they had done the best they could for us at Newmarket," her mother says, "so they referred us to the Bayview Cancer Clinic at Sunnybrook (Medical Centre)."

A week later Karen attended the clinic, where she underwent a Catscan to make sure everything was clear.

"After the surgery at Newmarket, when she was so ill, the doctor said the other ovary was clotted, but it was probably because of the haemorrhaging."

They were treating it as a cyst," Karen continued to visit

## Stouffville's Karen Paisley has fought a brave battle against cancer. The enthusiastic teen maintains high spirits in spite of the adversity of both the disease and its treatment.

the clinic for regular tests until June 28 of last year.

"She had a Catscan then and her doctor phoned at the beginning of July and told us to come down; they'd discovered that the cancer had spread to the other ovary," Margaret says. On this occasion, they decided to treat the tumor with five weeks of chemotherapy.

"She would go in for a week, from Sunday until Friday night, and then she was home for two weeks, until she'd go the five weeks in."

It was a traumatic and difficult time, admits Karen. "I was really sick for the first week; two days later my hair fell out." It took all the family's effort to persuade her to go back for the next session.

"I finished about the last week of October, a few times they had to call my dad down, and at one time I got so sick, they didn't think I'd make it."

She went back to Orchard Park Public School for half days following completion of the therapy, but the side effects of the cancer-fighting drugs began to cause problems.

"Chemotherapy pulls your blood down so low," notes Margaret. As a result, Karen's immunity was extremely low as well. One day, Karen phoned

from school feeling unwell, and her mother brought her home. When her temperature climbed that evening, "I took her to the hospital and her blood was so low she was in emergency for 24 hours."

She stayed in emergency "because they didn't have any beds, but she was in isolation because she had no resistance to infections. She was in hospital for two weeks and had blood transfusions and pills to try and get her blood up."

Once again, Karen became very ill. "One night they were giving me oxygen," she says.

"I stayed with her all that night; by the next morning she was better," Margaret recalls. "She came home on Nov. 8."

Two weeks later, Karen underwent another Catscan and ultrasound and "it looked as if the chemotherapy had worked; she had a clean bill of health."

Tragically, Karen's father Dave never learned that she'd won a major victory over her illness.

"He passed away on the 15th of November," explains Margaret. "It was very sudden and completely unexpected. He was just working in the barn and he collapsed."

Declares Karen, "the school was so good; the teachers, prin-

icipal and children were so kind and understanding."

As she tried to come to terms not only with her illness, but its side effects, she wondered if her friends would understand, "but they were really caring. If anybody made a smart remark they would stick up for me."

She was also amazed at how the community rallied round. "People in the streets that I didn't even know would come up and ask how I was doing."

She describes the doctors and nurses at Bayview and Sunnybrook as "fantastic" and has especially fond memories of the primary nurse, Susan Gilmore.

Says Margaret, "when Susan went on trips last summer she would bring Karen something back. She was super to her; she's become a friend."

Despite all she's been through, Karen's enthusiasm for life is undiminished. She's just returned from a 4-H exchange in Manitoba, which she described as "great. There was a lot to see and I had a partner out there who came back here to stay with me. It's been an excellent summer."

When Karen graduated from Orchard Park this year, she was presented with the Citizenship Award for helping others.

"They said she never gave up," says Margaret proudly.



Photo: KATE GILDERDALE  
Karen Paisley's battle against cancer hasn't been easy but the Stouffville teen's zest for life remains undiminished.



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