

Friend's death brings meaning of Fox run home

BY SUSAN KAUNISMAA

The weather is perfect. The sky is blue and the sun, brilliant. We are in our beautiful little Stouffville.

Hundreds of people gather together for a common initiative. It's the 24th annual Terry Fox Run.

We arrive early and go to the registration tent. We hand in our forms and are given ribbons to wear.

There is a memorial board made by the organizers and run participants. It brings tears to our eyes as we read the messages.

Dedications are made to those who have won their battle and those who have not. Pictures accompany many of the notes and we are reminded cancer touches young and old alike.

Words can't express what we are looking at. We are moved by the spirit around us.

We think of Aunt Ruby and Grandpa Kaunismaa who have won their battles with cancer. We think of other family members and friends still fighting.

We make our own dedication page in loving memory of my cousin Greg Ferguson, who passed away last week of non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and his family.

He was 47 and died on his son's seventh birthday. He had seven children.

Runners, bike-riders, roller bladers and walkers are readying themselves in their gear. The area is swarming with volunteers, all helping with the many tasks of this organized event.

Run organizer Sandy Schell Kennedy kicks off the run with words of inspiration. She talks about Terry, one of Canada's greatest heroes. We remember our own heroes.

Terry ran 42k a day for 143 straight days. On one leg.

This year's theme "How far will you go" challenges

True to Life

the participants to compare their own distance with the more than 5,000 km. Terry ran.

We feel overwhelmed by that comparison, but are proud to be a part of his legacy.

We are asked to think about our reasons for being there. We think of Greg and his family.

We think of Aunt Ruby and Grandpa Kaunismaa who have won their battles with cancer. We think of other family members and friends still fighting.

We need a Kleenex before the run starts.

Luckily Grammie is nearby. She will be our own cheering section.

Rob, Emily and Jackson leave with the first group on their bikes.

They finish the circuit twice for a total of 20k. Emily could barely do one circuit last year.

She enjoys the bike ride with her brother and dad. She is learning about the importance of this event. She is moved in her own way and I'm reminded that, at eight, she's wise beyond her years.

Rachel and I are lined up at the start line with the rest of the runners. We look official in our matching Terry Fox T-Shirts and shorts.

At 11, Rachel is among the youngest, if not the youngest, running. We see many of her friends. None of them have taken up the challenge of trying to run this long course.

She remains unsure 10k is far. She knows it.

She starts off fast and maintains a nice pace. We talk while we are running. We think about Greg and Penny. We talk about the kids.

We run harder, wishing we could do more.

We pass the first water

station. Rachel is not ready for a break.

Friends we are running with ask me if I think she can do this. I point to Rachel in response. They see the determination of this little girl for themselves.

We pass the halfway point and slow down a little. Rachel is getting tired, but a short power walk re-energizes her.

At this point, she has already run farther than ever before.

We stop at the next water station and get cheered on by friends, neighbours and well-wishers.

We pass a crowd of Rachel's friends. They can't believe she is running.

She goes faster as they marvel at her.

Around the next corner, too much water has now

given her a stitch in her side.

We talk about how far she has come. We talk about how few people can actually run this far.

We walk through her stitch. The short break has remedied the situation.

We are at the three-quarter point and have enough strength to continue.

We see people cheating on the course. Taking short cuts means they miss the water stations, which are strategically placed. It gives us a little laugh as we down our much-needed water. It's like nectar of the gods.

Not once are we tempted to cheat. We will run every step of this 10k.

As we continue, I see Rachel is hurting.

She alters her gait into a skip. I ask if she is limping because of pain in her legs. She explains it's a technique given to her by her coach to conserve energy.

She wants to stop running, but doesn't. I ask her if she wants to hold hands so I can help her run. Her answer: an emphatic no. She's doing this run one way, on her own steam.

Rachel's cramps return and make her wonder why she is out here. She now tells me she wishes she had ridden her bike.

I feel her pain and understand she is experiencing the mental side of this running game. She blames me for forcing her to do this. I remind her why.

She wanted to do this. I encourage her. I tell her we are almost done. She asks me how much longer. I say about 10 minutes.

She is no longer annoyed with me.

She digs deep. Next comes a burst of new-found energy.

We can now see the finish line. She starts to sprint. Her trademark way of finishing.

I can't keep up. My daughter is about to beat me. It makes me proud.

I see my mom. I start sprinting, too.

Congratulations abound as we reach the finish. I look at my watch. Our time is one hour and five minutes. We are happy with that.

We greet our family and friends at the end. Rachel is very quiet. I think she's too

tired to talk. I'm wrong.

I turn around and see her doing laps of the track on Emily's bike and catching up with a friend of hers.

We'll talk later and share thoughts about what we have just done together.

At the run tent, the children are given Josie Louis cakes (go figure!) and apples.

They have earned a certificate of completion. Our sense of accomplishment feels better than a certificate.

We look at our pledge sheets and feel proud. We have contributed to a great cause and are now part of an amazing legacy.

Today represented something different to each of us, some of which remains unspoken. Words can't properly describe this experience.

We were a small part of a worldwide initiative started by Terry Fox.

In a big little town called Stouffville.

Thanks to all of you for your love and support.

Susan Kaunismaa is a resident of Whitchurch Stouffville.

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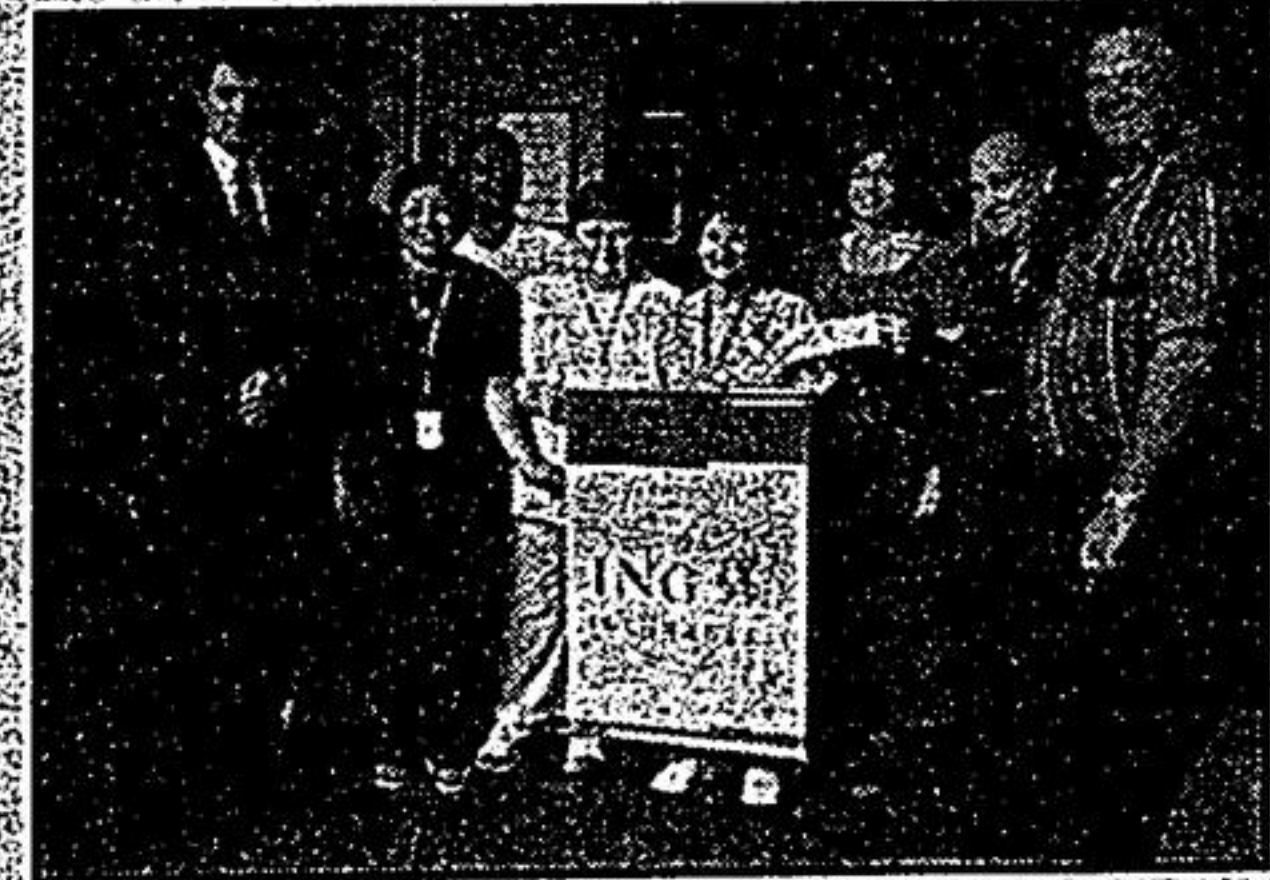
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