STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Ramsey (from left), Adrian, Nadine and Alexander Debaissi are hosting a car build and street party to raise money for Sick Kids. Adrian has leukemia.

Dad hopes Camaro project builds on cancer cure

BY SANDRA BOLAN
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Build a car and maybe find a cure for cancer.

That is what Stouffville's Ramsey Debaissi is hoping to do through his three-day Build For a Cause event.

From June 21 to 23, a portion of Reeves Way Boulevard in southern Stouffville will be closed to traffic and filled with about 200 classic cars, as well as food vendors, activities for kids, a band and DJ as well as characters from Sesame Street.

The Transformer vehicle from the movie of the same name will also be on hand.

All money raised will go towards Sick Kids Hospital's pediatric cancer research.

Starting the Friday night, Mr. Debaissi, who has a passion for building cars, along with eight of his friends, will rebuild a 1969 Camero. The car will be fully restored by Sunday night.

Mr. Debaissi already has a buyer for the vehicle and said the $5,000 to $10,000 profit he is expected to make from its sale will go directly to Sick Kids as well.

"We'll build a car and hopefully they'll create a cure," the 38-year-old said.

"We're not going to solve the problem or cure cancer but put a dent in it" through research, he said.

In February, Mr. Debaissi's then 14-month-old son Adrian was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

"We were devastated. My heart dropped," he said.

The diagnosis came after two weeks of visits to the doctor and emergency department to see why Adrian was bruising so easily, had pale skin and a lump on his neck.

His parents were told by more than one doctor Adrian had strep throat or was teething.

It wasn't until a doctor in Markham Stouffville Hospital's emergency department requested a blood test be done on Adrian, the leukemia was found.

If the diagnosis hadn't been made when it was, Adrian would have died a couple of hours later, according to Mr. Debaissi.

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Adrian was immediately transported to Sick Kids.

"Mistakes happen," Mr. Debaissi said of the multiple misdiagnoses.

"We appreciate a lot of things in life. We appreciate life, for one," he said.

Adrian spent three days in ICU, then was transferred to the hospital's cancer unit. He stays in Toronto four days a week and returns home to Stouffville the rest of the week.

His treatment is expected to last three-and-a-half years.

"If we get two hours consecutive a night (of) sleep, we're happy," Mr. Debaissi said of when Adrian comes home, noting his eldest son is nauseous, tired, cranky, has no energy and suffers from a lot of discomfort right now.

"It's been a battle," he said.

In the midst of Adrian's failing health and learning what its cause was, Mr. Debaissi and his wife Nadine were getting ready for the birth of their second child. Alexander was born April 20.

Mr. Debaissi left his job as an insurance adjustor in February to care for Adrian and because of stress. He plans on returning to work in a month or two.

This is the first time his family has been directly affected by cancer.

"Never really paid much attention to it until now," he admitted.

Adrian's chances of survival are good.

Close to 90 per cent of children diagnosed with leukemia get cured, according to Jessica MacInnis, manager of marketing and communications at Childhood Cancer Canada.

ALL is the most commonly diagnosed form of childhood leukemia and it occurs more in boys than girls.

Leukemia develops when the bone marrow's blood stem cells make abnormal blood cells. Over time, the leukemia cells crowd out the normal blood cells.

Treatment options typically consist of chemotherapy, radiation, a stem cell transplant or combination of them.

Build For a Cause goes rain or shine.