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In this issue:

- Bucket List Creates Bond Between Volunteer and Young Cancer Victim
-

Bucket List Creates Bond Between Volunteer and Young Cancer Victim

Tara and Jonathan Brown of Calgary first noticed something was amiss with their son, Alexander, when he came down with H1N1 flu on his second birthday. He experienced hand tremors, had trouble walking properly, and his head tilted slightly to one side.

A CT scan revealed a tumour on his brain the size of a lemon. Surgery removed it and Alexander's prognosis was good. But more tumours appeared on his brain and spine. For 10 months, Alexander bravely underwent surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation. But the tumours continued to grow. Alexander had a rare, terminal brain tumour. No one has ever survived more than 10 months past diagnosis.

With this bleak prognosis, the Brown family decided to spend the time Alexander had left doing the things he loved. They created a "bucket list", and began working through all the items on the list. As part of this, they contacted Kids Cancer Care, an organization that supports families battling childhood cancer. Alexander attended the organization's Camp Sunrise, a day camp for young children. He had his own aid because he was the youngest camper. The two became close friends, despite their age difference.

Passion for volunteering

Samantha Knight is a 17-year-old high school student. She's interested in pursuing a career in pediatric oncology, and this passion drove her to volunteer in hospitals and with Kids Cancer Care. At Camp Sunrise, Alexander and Samantha bonded over crafts, music, and games. When the week-long summer camp ended, the pair stayed in touch, and Samantha often babysat Alexander.

"We weren't together very long, but we still had a really big impact on each other's lives," Samantha said.

"Volunteers touch the lives of so many people in Canada," said Sue Luciuk, Interim CEO of Volunteer Calgary. "It is truly inspiring to learn about volunteers like Samantha and the impact she made and continues to make through the simple act of volunteering."

Ruth MacKenzie, President and CEO of Volunteer Canada, says the work of volunteers is essential to our communities as well as to our social fabric and telling them how their contributions are making a positive impact is one of the best ways to thank them. "There are 12.5 million volunteers in Canada contributing more than two billion hours every year," said MacKenzie.

On October 23, 2010, a few weeks before his third birthday, Alexander passed away with his parents at his side. Samantha attended the ceremony the Browns held to celebrate his life.

“Samantha became a good friend, and even after camp, she still came and visited him right up until he passed,” said Tara Brown. “She’s a big part of our lives now, and that’s not going to change.”

Preserving Alexander’s memory

The Brown family aimed to cross every item off Alexander’s bucket list before he passed away. After Alexander’s passing, the Browns decided to help other parents fulfill the final wishes of their terminally ill children. They founded Alexander’s Quest, a foundation that aims to raise awareness of children’s cancer, and to raise money so terminally ill children can complete their bucket lists.

“When you’re told you only have a couple months left with your kid, you’ll go broke to make sure his time is happy,” Tara explained. “We want to help other parents who are going through that. Now, we want to help people.”

For more information about Kids Cancer Care, please visit www.kidscancercare.ab.ca/.

About National Volunteer Week

National Volunteer Week (www.volunter.ca/nvw) pays tribute to the millions of Canadian volunteers who graciously donate their time and energy. This year’s 68th annual NVW takes place the week of April 10 to 16. It is Canada’s largest celebration of volunteers, volunteerism, and civic participation. The theme of this year’s National Volunteer Week is **Volunteers: Passion. Action. Impact.**

National Volunteer Week was first proclaimed in 1943 as an initiative to draw the public's attention to the vital contribution of women to the war effort on the home front. In the late 1960s, the focus was revived and broadened to include all community volunteers.

Investors Group has sponsored National Volunteer week for 12 years as part of its commitment to corporate citizenship. The company is a founding member of Volunteer Canada’s Corporate Council on Volunteering.