

Paul Cescon



When it is Christmas Eve and you are a little boy there are many important things on your mind – new toys and cookies being among the most prominent. However, for Paul Cescon it was on that day in 1993 that he was diagnosed with cancer.

Cescon was in third grade when he learned that he had Burkitt's lymphoma, a rare and aggressive cancer. The new year would bring surgery and eight months of grueling chemotherapy.

“Essentially, I had to put my life on hold. I didn't feel like I was a normal eight-year-old,” Cescon said.

“Why did an eight-year-old get cancer?” he pondered once. “You're never going to find an answer to that.”

So, even in the midst of his difficult recovery, a young Cescon stopped asking “why me?” and did something positive. He decided to raise money for the Canadian Cancer Society at a time when he was so weak from the cancer treatments that he had to use a wheelchair. His brother wheeled him around the neighbourhood, knocking on doors for pledges for the annual Great Ride N' Stride to Beat Cancer.

His three brothers, and parents Doctor Mel Cescon and Doctor Donna Ward, took part in the annual Waterloo Region event that year. Happily, Cescon has participated every year since and last year attended his thirteenth event. By the time Cescon reached high school, he had become “the most outstanding student fundraiser” in the history of the Waterloo Region District School Board.

During his time at Waterloo Collegiate Institute, Cescon led the school's Relay for Life, another fundraiser for the Canadian Cancer Society locally. He also became interested in how he could help on a global scale, helping to raise \$44,000 for Free the Children, an international youth charity that built two schools in Nicaragua. His fundraising efforts have also aided a hospital clinic in Kenya.

Cescon has been honoured with many awards as a result of his dedication to the community. In 2004, he received a Terry Fox Humanitarian Award and a City of Waterloo Millennium Scholarship to go toward his international development studies at Dalhousie University. In 2005, he won a prestigious Ontario Medal for Young Volunteers, which he received from Ontario's lieutenant governor.

Cescon has stated that he does this work for a straightforward reason. “I don't think I would be doing any of the stuff I'm doing if I hadn't been diagnosed with cancer.” But there is also the example of his mother, Dr. Donna Ward, who is a pioneering palliative care physician who has devoted her career to helping those dying of terminal illnesses.

Like her son, Ward believes she has an ethical responsibility to help those less fortunate and has raised money locally for AIDS programs in Africa. Cescon spent the summer of 2004 visiting Malawi and Kenya where he volunteered with several charitable organizations trying to help communities devastated by AIDS.

“In the rural village of Matangwe, Western Kenya, several of the children shared their stories with me. Many of the village children were orphans, so the older siblings cared for their younger brothers and sisters. Their lives as children, students, farmers, market vendors, and caregivers to the elderly and sick are extremely challenging. Every day is a struggle,” Cescon wrote recently.

Cescon approaches his commitment to those suffering with AIDS in the same way he coped with his recovery from cancer as a young boy. While it was devastating to see people in such dire situations, Cescon remains hopeful and positive - “. . . if we can get people on board to help, we can cause a miracle to happen.”

Photo courtesy of the Waterloo Chronicle.