

Maddie named Ontario's Junior Citizen of Year

Despite battling Ewing's Sarcoma for three years, teen helps build school, well in Kenya through MAD

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Maddison Babineau has been named the Ontario Junior Citizen of the Year for her selfless efforts in building a school for poverty stricken children in Africa, while battling bone cancer.

The 15-year-old Mountain girl has been fighting Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer since she was 12. Never has she let the disease take away her generous heart and fighting spirit.

When she was granted a wish from the Children's Wish Foundation - anything she wanted - she chose to build a school in Africa, not a trip to Disney, not a shopping spree, and no big-screen TV. She wanted to do something that would make a difference for others, make someone else's life better.

Through Free the Children, the Foundation donated \$6,500 to build a primary school in Enelerai, a Kipsigis community in the Maasai Mara. The Kenyan government has marginalized the community and there was little infrastructure there, including schools. Maddie's wish enabled Free the Children to build a school for 45 boys and girls to use and gain a brighter future.

This gives Maddison great inspiration to continue her fundraising efforts.

After her first surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatments to remove the cancer from her left shoulder and ribs, her cancer returned to the other side, this time attacking her right arm, just nine months after the first battle. While undergoing chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant at Toronto's Sick Kids and surgery, Maddie decided on another project. This time, she wanted to build a well to provide water to the students at her school.

She began selling jewelry out of her hospital room at Hamilton Health Sciences Children's Hospital at McMaster. Maddie did this while fighting ongoing nausea, with hardly any energy and on constant pain medication to get through. She had not eaten anything for more than two months as the chemotherapy had burned her digestive tract and she couldn't swallow. She was fed by IV and a G-tube in her stomach.

When she began selling jewelry, to nurses, friends and others in the community, she created MAD, an acronym for making a difference and the first three letters of her name.

MAD has since taken on even more projects, and it's Maddie's hope that through her fundraising efforts, she can raise money for school supplies, teachers, books and more for the school in Africa. The \$6,000 for the well is already on its way.



Maddison Babineau was chosen from more than 150 nominees in the province for the Ontario Community Newspaper Association's Junior Citizen of the Year award.

It's these brave and selfless acts that made Maddie an ideal choice for the Ontario Community Newspapers' Junior Citizen of the Year Award, which annually recognizes youth for their contributions to the community while living with limitations, or those who have performed acts of heroism.

Maddie, of course, falls into both categories, especially when you consider her past. When Maddison was born, her father was dying of ALS, (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) Lou Gehrig's disease. She helped care for him, feeding, fetching and making him laugh. During this period, she also helped with her younger brother Derek. Her dad died when she was six years old, leaving her mom Sharon to raise both children.

Needless to say, when Maddie was diagnosed at the end of her seventh grade with a life-threatening disease, it shocked the entire Babineau family into disbelief that illness had struck again.

Despite the journey through cancer treatment, Maddie was able to graduate from Grade 8, and began high school at St. Jean de Brebeuf. In fact, with the support of her friends and classmates, she helped to raise thousands of dollars for the Cancer Society's annual Relay for Life in June 2005, and as a group, participated in the all-night walk at Dofasco Park.

She continued selling jewelry, 100 per cent of the money goes to the project; \$5 for bracelets and earrings, \$7 for the necklaces or \$15 for the three together.

And while it seems she spends a lot of her days hospitalized to treat never-ending bouts of nausea and pain, it's her mom who helps lift her spirits.

When Maddie was hospitalized last fall for her prosthetic shoulder surgery, during which a cancerous tumour was removed, her mom delivered uplifting mail: a necklace from the Maasai, Kenyan kids' paintings, one of a school and a boy kicking a soccer ball and a letter from Craig Kielburger, founder of Free The Children, thanking Maddie for making a "lasting difference in the world".

Maddie is thrilled to be the recipient of the OCNA's Junior Citizen of the Year Award and looks forward to attending the annual spring awards banquet, which is in Niagara Falls at the end of March.

It's events like these and many others that Maddie and her family feel fortunate to be able to take part in.

"We are living life to the fullest under incredibly difficult circumstances," said Sharon. "She gets so sick and so weak, it takes my breath away.

"We are crossing off as many things on our list to do as we can. But the number one thing on Maddie's mind is the MAD project..

Sharon said she is overwhelmed by the community support the project and her family have been given.

Maddie is hoping to hold a dance to help raise awareness and funds, and perhaps even start selling T-shirts. She has high hopes, despite the ongoing concerns about her illness.

Right now, they are awaiting biopsy results from an area of concern on the site near her original tumour. But Sharon and Maddie will cross that bridge when it comes, and certainly after another exciting event, which saw Maddie attend the Ottawa Senators Buffalo Sabres hockey game on Wednesday night.

Ottawa is Maddie's favourite team, so she was excited at the opportunity to meet some of the players in Buffalo.

"We take advantage of the moments when Maddie's feeling well enough to take in as much as we can," added Sharon.

"She's grown so much over the last three years, intellectually and her compassion just amazes me."

She readily admits Ewing's Sarcoma is an aggressive, tough cancer to control, especially given its chemotherapy-resistance, but they are ready to try whatever it takes if the biopsy results are not favourable.

Meanwhile, family trips like last year's to the West Edmonton Mall keep them smiling. They were treated to the best after the hotel was tipped off about her MAD project, and they even got tickets to the Oilers' game.

Back home, Maddie has been attending school at St. Thomas More and enjoyed her first day of Grade 10 earlier this week. Schoolmates at her former school, Brebeuf have challenged STM to follow suit with their fundraiser for MAD, moustaches for Maddie, in which the school population is growing moustaches until April, when they will shave them, with all proceeds to help Maddie's fundraiser.

Maddie was also nominated for the Hamilton Spectator's Youth Volunteer of the Year Award in January, and received a standing ovation when the crowd of 400 listened to her achievements and goals for her MAD project.

You can learn more about the MAD project and learn how to purchase some jewelry to help, by visiting the website www.caringbridge.org/ca/maddie