

## Young boy stands tall for others

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**CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER**



In many ways, Cody Clark is your average 12-year-old boy. He loves video games and tae kwon do. Art is his favourite subject in school and he likes to read. But it doesn't take long to see that his life has been anything but average.

Cody has had more heartache in his childhood than many Canadians do in their entire lives. When he was 5, both his parents were diagnosed with cancer. As anyone would expect, this left him devastated and confused – he thought, wrongly, that he was soon going to be an orphan. But no one could have expected how the experience would change him.

Cody saw how his friends, family and even strangers rallied around him. He quickly learned the value of helping others and how important it is to make people feel loved in their time of need.

It was a lesson he took very seriously. So two years later when his friend Brenna needed a heart transplant, he knew what he wanted to do – "buy her a new heart." Cody raised \$2,500 as part of a Heart and Stroke Foundation fundraiser in his hometown of Kemptville in eastern Ontario.



Cody's Comfort Kits are reusable boxes filled with games, crayons, toys and a teddy bear.



Then, when he found out that the cardiac unit of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa – where Brenna was receiving treatment – was going to be closed, he rallied the local community to keep it open. Thanks to that public support, including the 2,500 signatures Cody collected for a petition, the unit is still open and Brenna is alive and well.

"I was very happy and thankful I had the chance to do that," he says in a timid voice.

When it comes to social activism, Cody is anything but shy. Organizing the petition was only the beginning of an inspirational young life devoted to helping others.

He knows first-hand how scary it can be for a kid landing in hospital. In 2002, the same year he raised money for Brenna, he had ear infections and a broken arm and was a regular patient at the hospital. Cody says he felt "sad and lonely, with nothing to do" there and saw how other young patients felt the same way.

In response, he set up Cody's Comfort Kits – reusable boxes filled with games, crayons, toys and a teddy bear – that he continues to give to youngsters in the emergency room at Kemptville District Hospital. Each kit comes with a personal letter from Cody wishing them a speedy recovery.

Cody was only 8 years old when the Comfort Kits were born – but he didn't see age as an issue. "Even though you are young, you can make a difference in people's lives – you can change the world," he says.

The Comfort Kits, which are partly funded by Cody's donations from his allowance, are meant to bring a smile to the faces of young patients. And they do. Illness is an especially frightening experience for children, so to have someone their age visit and bring toys can be very uplifting.

In 2003, Cody began delivering Grandma and Grandpa Kits, filled with books, magazines and crossword puzzles, to seniors in the hospital. So far he has given out 230 kits to youngsters and 80 to older patients. He has raised more than \$25,000 for the kits, and for the Kemptville hospital, through an annual local dinner he organizes called The Poorboy Supper.

His mother Jan is amazed at her son's good works. "Adults see reasons you can't do something, he only sees the reasons you can," she says with affection.

Cody's dedication was tested last February, when his father Steve succumbed to a six-year battle with cancer. His mom, who is now cancer free, remembers telling Cody then that it was okay to stop his charitable activities if he didn't feel up to it.

"There are more people out there who need me, mommy," he told her.

"Who is going to do it if I don't?"

So once again Cody has turned personal adversity into something positive, this time with Cody's Cuddlers – teddy bears that he gives to cancer patients at the Ottawa Regional Cancer Centre where his father received chemotherapy.

He has given out 100 bears so far and plans on visiting the centre once a month to deliver more in honour of his dad.

Cody likes to speak to both children and adults about the benefits of volunteering, and has a simple message for anyone who wants to make a difference. It's a message we could all learn from.

"Don't give up."

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***Craig and Marc Kielburger*** are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.