

## Fun program 'payback' for being ill, girl says

LISA QUEEN

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When North York preteen Malka Erlanger developed a cough last year, it was easily dismissed as a simple childhood illness.

And a lump in her neck was thought to be a swollen gland.

But Malka just couldn't seem to shake the persistent hack.

Unfortunately, the symptoms turned out to be far more serious than those of an annoying summer cold.

Last July, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system.

"I had a cough for a very long time, for a few months, because the tumour was pushing on my airway. I had a lump in my neck because I had another tumour in my neck," said the articulate 12-year-old who lives in the area of Bathurst Street and Lawrence Avenue.

Initially, Malka said she and her family didn't understand the seriousness of her diagnosis.

"They didn't say cancer, they said Hodgkin's lymphoma so it (seemed) good. We thought it was going to be like strep throat or pneumonia," she said.

"(A little while later), my mom explained it to me. I was crying. She said I have to stay in hospital for a long time. (She said) 'It's cancer but they don't even call it cancer because it is a good type of cancer and almost everybody gets better.'"

Malka underwent chemotherapy, lost her hair, often felt very sick and missed a considerable amount of school.

Fortunately, she is in remission and has resumed her Grade 7 classes at Bais Bracha school.

Now, every Wednesday, Malka attends an after-school program called Shining Stars, run by Chai Lifeline, that provides support to seriously ill children and their families.

Launched last September at Prosserman JCC (Jewish Community Centre) at 4588 Bathurst St. north of Sheppard Avenue, Shining Stars is open to children aged four to 12 who have a life-threatening illness or a life-long physical disability that does not impair their cognitive or verbal skills.

Each week, youngsters participate in activities such as making ceramics, games and races, music therapy and yoga geared to children in wheelchairs. The activities are followed by dinner.

Malka, the eldest of seven children in her family, is particularly fond of making ceramics and also enjoys helping other children in the program.



**Fun program 'payback' for being ill, girl says.** Malka Erlanger, 12 takes part in Shining Stars, run by Chai Lifeline, that provides support to seriously ill children and their families. *Photo/SUBMITTED*

"I like going and being part of it. It kind of feels like you were sick and it's payback (for being ill). You missed the summer, you missed trips. You are getting paid back," said Malka, who also hopes to attend Chai Lifeline's summer camp and go on a trip to Israel with the organization.

Malka's mother, Rivky Erlanger, said Chai Lifeline reached out to her daughter and family during a very difficult time.

"I feel Chai Lifeline was really, really helpful emotionally. They were always there for us. They always made us feel we're not alone," she said.

"Malka really enjoys the program. They know her and understand her. They are really giving. They want them (children in the program) to have a good life. They want them to feel normal and regular."

Rabbi Mordechai Rothman, executive director of Chai Lifeline Canada, said Shining Stars is a welcoming place for very ill children and youngsters with disabilities. Many of them may have grown up seeing siblings go off to karate or swimming lessons but have never had a chance to attend activities themselves.

"The program is important most importantly for the kids so they can get an opportunity to feel empowered and connect with each other in an after-school program that is something they wouldn't (otherwise) be able to get to," he said.

"That's the most important, the bonding they create. Seeing the relationships grow and being nurtured is beautiful and an important aspect of the program. And giving the parents respite at home, to get some rest and relaxation so they can come back and be the best parents they can be."

About 25 children attend Shining Stars, although Rothman is hoping sponsors will come forward to expand the program.

Shining Stars' registration fee is \$75 for a 10-week program including transportation and meals. The fee may be reduced or waived if it presents a financial hardship.

Although Chai Lifeline has many Jewish clients, eligible children of any background are welcome at Shining Stars.

For more information or if you are interested in sponsoring the program, visit [www.chailifelinecanada.org](http://www.chailifelinecanada.org) or call 647-430-5933.

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