

Greater Toronto Area

Chai Lifeline helps kids with serious illnesses

By MICHAEL SEGAL
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Ask 11-year-old Robert Jones if he wants to watch a homemade family video and you'll likely get an indifferent shrug of the shoulders. Ask him about viewing a video of Camp Simcha and he jumps at the opportunity.

"I really enjoy Camp Simcha," he enthusiastically. "You can forget about all your worries in life there and just have fun."

Located in upstate New York, the camp provides a joyous reprieve for children with cancer and other life-threatening illnesses.

It's one of several programs and services offered by Chai Lifeline, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping kids with

serious health problems and their families.

"Something that's a little different about pediatric illnesses is that it really affects the entire family," says Rabbi Mordechai Rothman, executive director of Chai Lifeline Canada.

"We try to provide programs that give that extra needed care to the child, their siblings and the parents. And we never ask for payment from families."

Launched in New York in 1986, Chai Lifeline now has regional offices in five American states, as well as Israel and England, and it's been in Canada for a few years.

The Canadian office recently ramped up its diverse network of programs to include everything from family counselling and tutor-

ing services to Big Brother and Big Sister programs and toy drives.

The Jones' learned about Chai Lifeline while Robert was at the Hospital for Sick Children receiving care for leukemia.

Robert initially linked up with a Chai Big Brother who later referred him to the camp.

"At Camp Simcha, they make a conscientious effort that all kids share in the same fun," says Robert's mother, Rona Geringer.

"And they are also very concerned about the kid's medical conditions and accommodate kids across all spectrums."

To that end, the camp has medical professionals onsite, including oncologists and nurses, who can cater to the children's medical issues, if necessary.

While Chai Lifeline is still relatively new in Canada, it's making an indelible mark.

"If you talk to any of our families, they will tell you what a difference we make in their lives," Rabbi Rothman says. "We just want to be there for you and do whatever we can for your family."



Robert Jones, left, dons a wacky hat at Camp Simcha

In addition to his summers at Camp Simcha, Robert has also travelled to Orlando, Fla., on a trip organized by Chai Lifeline.

"It was probably one of the most amazing trips of my life," he says.

Robert's father Frank says Chai's programs haven't just provided his son with fun and entertainment, but they have also taught him to appreciate what he has.

"Robert sits down and writes thank-you letters to the people at Chai Lifeline, because he has become so appreciative of how people have gone out of their way for him," Frank says.

There are about 50 Chai Lifeline volunteers in Canada and Rabbi Rothman says the organization always welcomes more help.

If you're interested in volunteering or inquiring about Chai Lifeline's unique program, visit www.chailifelinecanada.org or phone 430-5933.

TOY COLLECTION: The students of Bais Chaya Mushka elementary school in Toronto collected toys to be distributed by Chai Lifeline Canada, which helps children dealing with serious illnesses. Pictured from left with some of the toys are Chai Lifeline Canada director Rabbi M. Rothman and Grade 8 committee heads Baila Adler, Itty Wagner and Mushka Korf.

