

# Chai Lifeline's Shining Stars Afternoon Program Keeps Sick Children Smiling

Toronto – Offered by Chai Lifeline Canada, the Shining Stars afternoon program gives sick and special needs children the chance to leave their worries behind.

Afternoon programs sometimes seem like a dime a dozen. From sports teams to swimming lessons and art classes to play groups, there's no shortage of activities to keep kids busy for an hour or two after school. But Shining Stars is no ordinary afternoon program.

So, what sets it apart from the rest?

Offered once a week on Wednesdays at the Prosserman JCC, Shining Stars is unique in that it gives parents the option of sending their seriously ill or special needs child, aged four to twelve, to the afternoon activities with his or her siblings.

Toronto-based Chai Lifeline, an organization which provides emotional and financial support to families battling life-threatening and chronic pediatric illness, recognized the need for a program that allowed siblings to play together. An additional benefit of the program is that the afternoon off gives parents some much needed

down time, especially with the program's door-to-door transportation service.

Activities such as ceramics and music therapy keep the kids busy and smiling. Special needs children receive one-on-one care from dedicated Tiferas Bais Yaakov high school volunteers.

Malka Erlanger is a friendly and creative 12-year-old girl who loves sewing, arts and crafts, reading and potatoes without onions! The Erlanger family's world was shaken when Malka was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma in the summer of 2010, just a few weeks before her birthday.

"When we got the results, we were shocked and distressed," recalls Rivki Erlanger, Malka's mother, who at the time of her daughter's diagnosis was pregnant with twin girls. But the very next morning, Chai Lifeline Canada's Director, Rabbi Mordechai Rothman, and Shining Stars program coordinator Yaffi Ulman came to visit the family at the hospital. They brought with them words of encouragement, information about the organization's services, kosher food, DVDs and games

to keep Malka busy. "They were so overwhelmingly supportive and giving at such a difficult time for our family," Rivki explains. When Malka came home from her first Shining Stars afternoon program, she was excited. "She felt everybody there had their own problems they were facing and understood each other," remarks Rivki. Malka, who had lost her hair after several rounds of chemotherapy, felt comfortable at the program, like "no one was staring at her."

Malka is grateful for the support she received from Chai Lifeline from the time of her diagnosis throughout her treatment. "I'd love to volunteer for Chai Lifeline when I get older," she enthuses. Having battled cancer at such a young age, she hopes to share the lessons she has learned with other children facing serious illness. "It's a long thing to go through. I would teach them what I learned and tell them how I got through it," Malka comments.

Julie Gonik, whose six-year-old daughter is diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy and attends Shining Stars, agrees that the program is, "amazing for the kids and truly a respite for the parents." Maya, a happy, friendly little girl with an amazing memory, cannot walk, has difficulty sitting up and uses a wheelchair for mobility. It is hard for her to have regular play dates with other kids because someone needs to facilitate the play. Her mom adds, "Maya loves the program and looks forward to it every week. She loves seeing her best friend: she loves the music therapy and



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The Chai Lifeline Shining Stars program also affords many high school students eager to reach out and give back to the community, the opportunity to volunteer. Most of the volunteers that are involved in the shining stars program come from Tiferes Bais Yaakov, a school that has bent over backwards to give their students time to volunteer in this program.

Leora Hertzog, a twelfth grade student at Tiferes Bais Yaakov, has worked as a counselor at Chai Lifeline's summer camp as well as the Shining Star after school program. She comments, "Chai Lifeline helps so many sick people and their families get through the impossible. Everyone involved is like one big family. We get through it together and fight illness with love." She describes Shining Stars as a "really well run, organized program that allows everyone to have a good time. The Wednesday program not only gives the kids an opportunity to be active and have a good time, but it also gives the parents a break for a couple of hours to relax or get whatever it is that needs to be done, done."

Leora expresses that she draws inspiration from the children because they are all so happy. "It's such a good feeling to see a smile spread across a child's face and you know they're having as good a time as you are."

For more information about the program, visit [www.chailifelinecanada.org](http://www.chailifelinecanada.org), or call (647) 430 - 5933.

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