

Laughter leads to understanding

This Week • January 21, 2014

Hearth Place volunteers use puppets to help kids relate to cancer

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DURHAM -- When a grinning, blue-eyed puppet named Sophie takes off her hat to reveal a bald head underneath, there is collective gasp from the six-, seven- and eight-year-old students crowded into the gym at Oshawa's Vincent Massey Public School.

"Her hair is gone," cries a little boy in the front row, nudging his friend and pointing. "It fell out."

It's one of many poignant moments in a short but sweet puppet show helping elementary school students understand what cancer is and how to support a classmate or family member coping with the disease.

"The play really helps them learn compassion and how to handle it when they see someone who looks different," says Laurie Bass, one of nine volunteers who help stage the show for free at local schools. "If someone is bald or missing a leg, they're not going to be as shocked."

The volunteers -- most of whom have had cancer themselves -- come from Hearth Place Cancer Support Centre, which offers support groups, wellness programs and other help for Durham cancer patients and their families.

The puppets, scripts and educational resources are provided by Camp Quality, a non-profit group that gives kids with cancer a chance to go to summer camp.

The program includes a version of the play for students from kindergarten to Grade 3 and one for students in grades 4 to 6.

The Hearth Place team has been performing at schools in Durham since 2007, usually averaging about one show a month.

"It's really fun, I love to see the reactions from the kids," says puppeteer Sonja Shepherd, who is also the membership and volunteer coordinator at Hearth Place. "I usually deal with heavy emotional stuff when I'm at work ... this is a way to talk to people about cancer but in a lighter way."

The show features four life-size puppets who teach students about compassion, respect and courage by exploring the challenges faced by Sophie -- who loses her hair after chemotherapy treatment for leukemia -- and Max, whose leg was amputated as part of his cancer treatment.

“You never know what kinds of things kids are going to ask. Jeanette McCrae, volunteer puppeteer

The other two characters are classmates Natalie and Jack, whose questions about cancer -- can you catch it from sharing clothes? What's it like to stay in the hospital? -- tackle some of the misconceptions real-life kids commonly

have.

After each performance, the puppeteers take questions from kids, an exercise volunteer Jeanette McCrae describes as "a real hoot."

"You never know what kinds of things kids are going to ask," she says.

The questions at Vincent Massey P.S. ranged from the serious -- had any of the puppeteers had cancer? -- to the puppet-centric, including whether the puppets have teeth and how they get dressed.

The Hearth Place puppeteers are hoping to increase their performances and are inviting local schools to get more information by calling Sonja Shepherd at 905-579-4833 or e-mailing sonja@hearthplace.org.

For more information:

CALL 905-579-4833

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RYAN PFEIFFER / METROLAND

OSHAWA -- The Camp Quality/Hearth Place Puppeteers have been performing in the Durham Region since 2007. The life-sized puppets deliver important messages incorporating the virtues of courage, compassion, respect, kindness and helpfulness in relation to cancer patients. Pictured on Jan. 18, from left, are puppeteers Jeannette McCrae and Dale McLaughlin.

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