

Magic Castle offers peace of mind in a time of stress

Sheri Skwarek has so much to be grateful for in waging her three-year battle with cancer.

There's the "incredible human being" who donated bone marrow for lifesaving transplant surgery, as well as the doctors and nurses at Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital who continue to care for her. But the mother of 10-year-old Binney is especially grateful to the hospital's Magic Castle.

The in-hospital childcare service for patients is an "essential service" in Sheri's husband Ed's mind.

"Binney loved it there. It took her mind off things and lessened the worry," Ed said. Knowing that, in turn, eased the worry that kept Sheri up nights during her months-long stays at the hospital and allowed Ed to focus on his wife's care. Sheri was diagnosed with leukemia on February 13, 2007, the day before Valentine's Day.

"I felt perfectly fine," said the Kerr Street

"The Magic Castle is an important part of the cancer journey."

— Eleanor Szakacs

resident Ed Skwarek. Blood tests taken in preparation for arthroscopic knee surgery revealed the anomaly of white cells. Where a normal

count sits at four, Sheri's was 85.

Aggressive rounds of chemotherapy ensued immediately because of Sheri's young age. She was 42 years old at the time of her diagnosis.

When the nurses saw Ed arriving at the hospital hand-in-hand with Binney, who was just six-years-old then, they suggested the Magic Castle as a resource. There the Skwareks met their godsend, early childhood educator Eleanor Szakacs.

The 14th and 15th floor of Princess Margaret Hospital are scary places in a constant state of emergency. At a child's eye level they see a plethora of tubes coming out of people, bald heads, skeletal bodies, and bags on bars, said Ed.

For Sheri, speaking was difficult because of mouth sores, she had hemorrhaging from her eyes, and her body was so weak, it became painful just to have Binney sitting on the bed with her.

The Magic Castle and Eleanor became a reprieve for the whole family.

There Binney could make a craft and deliver it to her mom upstairs, play dress-up, or with puzzles or games, or speak to Eleanor one-on-one about what was on her mind.

"The Magic Castle took so much stress away from us — as did supportive family, friends and neighbours," said Sheri. "And every time Binney visited Eleanor in the Castle, she would come back happy."

Established in 1995, the Magic Castle is the only hospital-based childcare centre of its kind in the world. Eleanor is the



Eleanor Szakacs, an Early Childhood Educator, enthalls children with a story at the Magic Castle.



Eleanor stands in front of the Magic Castle, a unique childcare service provided by Princess Margaret Hospital.

only fulltime staff but she has help caring for the newborn to 12-year-old children who come into her care Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day. Hospital

volunteers, Toronto District School Board co-op students and Mothercraft interns also do their part daily.

Eleanor came to the Castle in 2003,

transferring from Mothercraft's Brookfield Place (at Yonge and Front in Toronto) where she worked with infants for 12 years.

"The Magic Castle is an important part of the cancer journey," said Eleanor. "And to think that I contributed to it, makes me feel good."

When kids have questions about their mom or dad's illness "we have to be very careful about what we say," said the childcare teacher. "This is the tough part of the job." Sensitivity and truthfulness are paramount, though.

As a result of her positive influences, Eleanor has become an integral part of many families' lives even after cancer is no longer a part of their lives. She often gets cards, paintings, notes and photos of thanks from her little charges and their parents.

"The care we give at the Castle benefits the body, mind and spirit in a non-medical atmosphere, so that parents can focus on the treatment and not worry about the kids," said Eleanor.

For her exemplary work at the Magic Castle, Eleanor won the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education in 2006.

Children, whose parents come to Princess Margaret on an in-patient basis, also continue visit the Magic Castle by choice. It has made visiting a hospital a cheerful experience.

Binney is among these happy campers, who accompanies her mom when it's time to get a check up at Princess Margaret.

"To have the child in the process but away from the all the intense stuff makes dealing with it all somehow more bearable, said Binney's dad, Ed. "I have no idea how a family can go through this without the Magic Castle."

While there is no charge for this childcare service, it costs about \$100,000 annually to operate and currently Eleanor is the only one on staff. Volunteers help to keep it running smoothly.

The Magic Castle is entirely donor supported, which is where Carlos Jardino steps in.

The local custom home builder and president of PCM is going a step further than building one of the luxury homes in Princess Margaret Hospital Foundation's 2009 home lottery.

He said he would donate \$25,000 from each of the next four homes he sells from now until the end of the year, to the Magic Castle.

Any realtor who sells one of his homes will receive recognition on the hospital's donor wall as a result of the \$25,000 donation.

He's also putting out a challenge to builders and realtors to do their part for this very worthwhile cause.

"Maybe they can beat me to the finish line," said Jardino.