

Annual CHEO telethon raises \$3.7 million, sets new record

Purveyor of smiles sheds a tear for brave young patients

BY ZEV SINGER

About an hour before the balloons drop, revealing a \$3.7-million total, the highest for the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario annual telethon, Ruth Cull — nose red, hair blue — was doing something she always tries to avoid.

She was in the background, not on camera at the moment. But if you looked carefully at the clown you could see that she was crying.

"I knew Cory," she said. In 29 years as a nurse at CHEO, she, like everyone else there, has had days where she had to cry. Usually she has been able to wait until she gets home before the sadness, or the bravery, overcomes her.

In the last year, since she first started putting on the oversized red shoes twice a week, she guesses there have been about four or five times when she couldn't stop herself and had to duck out before any of the children saw tears.

To them, she is Molly Penny, purveyor of smiles and treats — and she hates the idea of letting them down.

Up on the screen, though, the story of Cory Maestrello is being told. In January, he lost his fight against bone cancer. He was 17.

"I knew Cory" is all the clown says about him — until she resumes her search for the young man she'd been on her way to hug, Jason Campbell.

"We knew (Cory) together,"

she says.

The clown keeps things simple. She expresses her feelings most clearly, she struggles to say, by finding a child's hand to hold.

She catches up to Mr. Campbell, 20, and brings him back wearing a sticker that says "Clown, plainclothes division."

Mr. Campbell, who was a good friend of Cory's, is in remission from the same type of cancer, which he developed when he was 15.

He says he became very close to Cory because he admired the way the younger boy could stay so positive.

The eyes of Mr. Campbell, an Algonquin College business student, are not misting up right now. He tells it mat-

ter-of-factly.

"Yo I have a lot better chance of making it if you're positive," he says.

A lot of the friendships that develop down the corridors of the hospital are between children of varying ages, 12-year-old Andrew Rouble explains.

Andrew, who is in the hospital at least once a month for gamma globulin shots to treat his primary immune deficiency, says older kids try to help younger ones.

Bonds form along age lines that are rare outside the hospital.

"It's just like hanging out with someone your own age," he says.

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JANA CHRYTILOVA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Mitchell Baar, 6, with Molly Penny, a therapeutic clown, at yesterday's CHEO telethon. Mitchell suffers from Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, and is a patient of CHEO.

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