



Justin Greaves/Metroland

Helena Kirk holds beads that represent the 659 procedures she went through and 801 days of chemotherapy; and remembers friends that she supports and friends she has lost to cancer.

Cancer survivor fights for friends still in treatment

Helena Kirk is a cancer survivor on a mission. The 12-year-old girl has undergone 841 days of chemotherapy since she was diagnosed with leukemia at just three and a half years old, but she says her battle isn't over yet.

"Right now, I'm fighting for my friends who are still in their treatment," a resolute Helena told Metroland Media Toronto, holding her colourful bravery beads from Sick-Kids Hospital, each one of them marking one of the more than 650 procedures she went through.

It was with the same conviction that she founded Helena's Hope in 2017, an initiative aiming to carve "pathways to more kids surviving cancer."

Teaming up with

Helena Kirk is a young cancer survivor who founded Helena's Hope, an initiative to push for equal access to promising clinical trials for children and young adult cancer patients.

Ac2orn, a national advocacy group for childhood, adolescent and young adult cancers, they worked on a proposal to recommend changes and improvements to Health Canada. More than 30 cancer organizations and 30 pediatric clinicians and researchers have endorsed the proposal, which mainly calls for the enabling of fair access to early phase cancer clinical trials and treatments, as well as to provide more funding to cover the associated medical costs.

Dr. Jim Whitlock, the division head of haematology and oncology at the Hospital for Sick Children, said that there's no good system in place allowing children with cancer to access potential treatments outside of their home province.

Many provinces won't cover the associated costs, as they consider the trials as being experimental.

"Why do we provide treatment access based on where the children were born? It's unfair," said Whit-

Helena Kirk founded Helena's Hope after long childhood battle with leukemia

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lock.

He hopes the federal government will establish a program to ensure children and young adults with cancer can access phase 1 and 2 clinical trials due to their promising results. The oncologist gave an example of immunotherapy clinical trials, which have a remission rate of about 90 per cent.

To Helena, there's not a moment to waste when it comes to saving the lives of childhood cancer patients, many of whom she calls friends.

The Cosburn Middle School student, accompanied by mother Sarah Calderwood, laid out some of their pictures on the dining table in their East York home.

There's a picture of Ja-

dyn, who succumbed to the disease a few months ago.

"She was my best friend and she relapsed for the eighth time. She ran out of treatment options. Even though she qualified for a clinical trial, it came too slow," Helena said, sharing the details of her friend's battle with ependymoma - a type of brain tumour.

"She was then offered palliative care. We lost her in March two weeks after her birthday," Helena said, as her voice grew softer.

She spoke of Jake and Aidan - both ran out of treatment options in Canada and their families had to raise \$50,000 to proceed with the clinical trial in the U.S., but Aidan's family couldn't raise it quickly enough.

"In the four and a half months that Aidan was

waiting, they found that his tumour had grown 400 per cent. He didn't have a choice ... they pulled his life support a few days ago," she said, noting that Jake is doing well having received the therapy.

The stories are part of

the reason why Helena is advocating on behalf of her friends and other children

battling cancer. Among those she has met include Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, then-Health Minister Jane Philpott and her successor Ginette Petitpas Taylor, and Science Minister Kirsty Duncan - as well as other government officials and MPs.

"And it grew from there," she said, adding that the feedback so far has been

positive.

In late April, she was recognized in the House of Commons by MPs Anita Vandenberg and Nathaniel Erskine-Smith for her work.

Years of chemotherapy might have taken a toll on

Helena's body, as she admits to sometimes suffering from muscle and fatigue issues. But they're not enough to hold her back. Remembering the advice

from the prime minister, the 8th grader - who wants to be a paediatric oncologist in the future - will not stop her advocacy efforts.

"I will keep fighting for better treatments for cancer kids so everyone can survive like I have," she said.

Visit helenashope.com for more information on how you can help or go to the GoFundMe page.

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- Helena Kirk