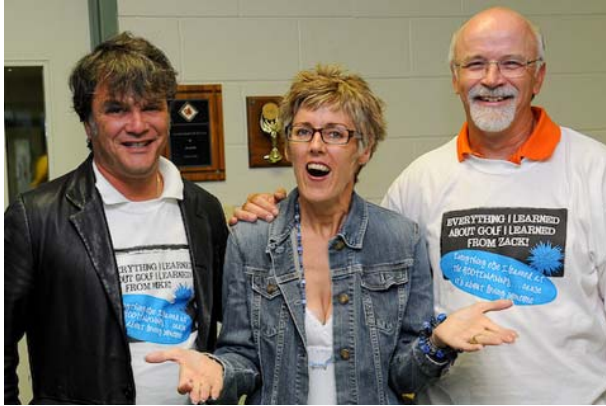


Unbeatable personalities inspire hope for ALS research and treatment.

December 3, 2009



At the Hootenanny - (from left) Canadian Idol's Zach Warner, Heather Snell and Dr. Mike Strong

LONDON, Ont. - Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or "Lou Gehrig's disease" may place limits on people's physical abilities but, for some it cannot suppress their hope to defeat this condition.

Diagnosed with ALS in 2006 Ayr resident Heather Snell eventually lost her ability to speak and play the piano, and now communicates through sign language and a keyboard. Still, she remains the inspiration and the driving force in an annual fundraiser called "Heather's Hootenanny for Hope."

The event raised close to \$90,000 in its first two years and another \$70,000 this year.

Additional monies were contributed by an ALS snowmobile ride last February, bake sales, pond hockey, and concerts held by former music students and friends of Heather; bring the total to well over \$200,000 in just a few years.

Proceeds support the work of Heather's physician, Dr. Michael Strong, Chief of Neurology at London Health Sciences Centre. The only Canadian to have earned both international awards given for ALS research, Dr. Strong conducts his research at the Robarts Research Institute in London and runs an ALS clinic at LHSC with Dr. Christen Shoesmith. The clinic is an international referral centre, seeing patients from across Canada, as well as Europe and Asia.

"I don't know if hope fuels research or research fuels hope," Snell writes, "but I think they work together like Dr. Strong and his team who contribute to this important research."

The driving force in Heather's life is her family. Her husband Bob and her three children Meg, Stuart and Ben fuel her positive and determined attitude.

"If we're together and surround ourselves with a caring community, we'll be better, stronger people with some truly great memories and lifelong friendships," Snell tells them.

Like Heather's friends and family, the Barber family from St Thomas and the community have rallied around Steve Barber since his diagnosis 5-1/2 years ago. Barber first lost the grip in his hands and had some difficulty with balance. Now unable to use his hands, he has trouble walking.

"It's a bit frustrating, but it is better to focus on being positive and living normally as much as possible," says Barber, who turned 31 in September.

According to Dr. Strong, the disease usually targets patients over 50, but about a third are under the age of 45.

In 2004, a London walk for ALS included a 150-strong "Team Believe" comprised of the Barber family, friends and supporters, and outfitted in shirts supplied by Steve's childhood friend, NHL star Joe Thornton. Over the years they raised about \$100,000 for the London walk before raising \$37,000 more in the first annual "St. Thomas Walk for Lou Gehrig's Disease" last year.

The new event was organized because the Barbers wanted to directly support Dr. Strong's efforts. This year's walk, a golf tournament called "Believe in a Cure", and an event called "Meg Barber and Friends Music in the Park" resulted in another \$37,000.



The power of believing - Steve Barber (centre right) with dad Bob, mom Linda and sister Megan.

Both groups of fundraisers were on hand at Roberts Research Institute today to present London Health Sciences Foundation with \$37,000 from the St Thomas events and \$58,000 from the Hoot (an additional \$12,000 from the Hoot had previously been delivered to the Foundation).

Dan Ross, President and CEO of LHSF and Dr. Strong accepted the cheques and thanked both groups for their outstanding efforts, stressing how important their contributions are to healthcare in the region and beyond.

"In the case of our research program, many of the critical ideas that we have pursued in developing novel approaches to ALS would never have seen the light of day in the absence of this support," says Dr. Strong. "Indeed, new concepts in the causation of ALS that reflect changes in our fundamental understanding of the disease, take their origin directly from research performed here in London and supported by our ALS community."

Illustrating this point Dr. Strong shared a break through discovery, made by his research team, that was wholly funded by individual donations and by contributions from community-based fundraising events like the Hoot and the St. Thomas Walk for Lou Gehrig's Disease.

The presentation showed how the normal processing of proteins by RNA differs in ALS patients. This surprise announcement was made in advance of an ALS conference in Berlin next week, where the discovery will be formally unveiled to an international audience.