SPECIAL ADVERTISING FEATURE

Kidz beat

by Emma Lee, contributing writer

THE VANISHA FOUNDATION:

helping children and families in need

In 2003, when Stefan Grupp was born in New Westminster, he had so many health challenges that medical professionals told his parents to basically make him as comfortable as possible – he wasn't expected to survive. Weighing just 1 lb and 5 oz and making his premature debut at just 23 weeks and 5 days old, Stefan was categorized as a "micro-preemie" with a list of complications that far outnumbered his 10 baby fingers and toes.

STEFAN GRUPP IS ONE OF THE CHILDREN THAT BENEFIT FROM THE GENEROSITY OF THOSE WHO DONATE TO THE VANISHA FOUNDATION.

But Stefan did survive. And today, at seven years old and a slight 27 lbs, he's come a long way, but he still has a lifetime of hurdles ahead of him. Stefan is not only deaf, he also can't speak, eat with his mouth (he's fed through a tube in his stomach), sit, crawl or walk. He requires care 24 hours a day, which he has received every day since he was born.

For the parents of a child with highly specialized needs like Stefan, caring for your child can be a marathon test of physical and emotional strength, necessitating great adjustment and sacrifice. For Erin and Holger Grupp, Stefan's parents, after six years of managing, they knew they needed help. Things were falling between the cracks – including their older son, 16-year-old Riley, and the health of the couple's relationship. So they contacted The Vanisha Foundation.

The Vanisha Foundation is a non-profit organization that supports the provision of medical services, equipment and treatment for children with a facial difference or disfigurement where medical funding may be limited or unavailable. And recently, the foundation expanded its helping hand to helping families with children, who are facing other issues, like the Grupps.

It all started in 2000, when a group of individuals learned about a nine-year-old girl from Abbotsford named Vanisha Dayal (after whom the foundation is named), who, after a life-saving surgery to remove a massive cancerous tumour on her face, required reconstructive surgery that could only be performed by a doctor in the United States. The price tag? A steep $150,000 that the Dayal family did not have.

"As an ad-hoc group and without any vision for a mission, our sole purpose was to raise funds for this one girl, Vanisha Dayal," explains Michael Kumar, president of The Vanisha Foundation. "Within a period of six months, we had raised $150,000 for her reconstructive surgery and further follow-up surgeries as required. While the group of individuals involved was content with the accomplishment, they as a group wanted to continue to raise funds for other children residing in British Columbia. In the summer of 2000, the Operation Smile Because We Care Foundation [which was later renamed The Vanisha Foundation] was born."

The Vanisha Foundation raises all its funds through events held throughout the year to raise awareness for the organization or its particular causes, says Kumar. And the events gaining momentum and getting the attention of those who want to 'pay it forward.' "Our inaugural Annual Charity Golf started in 2000 with only 44 golfers and raised $1,800 that year. Today, the event has 144 participants and raises in excess of $10,000," he says.

In addition to helping qualifying individual families like the Grupps, the foundation also works with the Cleft Palate Craniofacial Division of BC Children's Hospital, and has either raised money to purchase specialized equipment or donated funds, to date totaling $65,000.

After Erin contacted the foundation, her family qualified to receive financial assistance from the organization. She says the money does more than just pay for more help with Stefan – it has given the family balance.

"It's given us a new lease on life, a little freedom to be like a normal family. We are a one-income family with a special-needs child. Because of the foundation's support, I can have a break, pay for housekeeping, or do something as a family with our older son Riley."

For this family, the gift of the foundation's support is priceless.

As for the little girl named Vanisha, the namesake of the foundation and the one who inspired it all? She has just turned 21 and is studying to become a pediatric nurse, a professional choice that her mom Jaishree doesn't think is a coincidence. "I think her early experience helped shape her career choice. From day one, that's all she's ever wanted to do."

Now that's paying it forward.

Support The Vanisha Foundation: If you'd like to volunteer or donate, visit www.thevanishafoundation.com.