



Rebecca's brave fight brought us together

By Scott Radley
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This story started with a phone call, so it's only appropriate it ends there.

Except this time, instead of an international celebrity on the line, it was a McMaster student saying her class wanted to do something for Rebecca Johnstone.

You may recall Rebecca as the soccer fanatic who came to this city's attention last week through a tale about a surprise phone call she received from soccer star David Beckham in the midst of a particularly bleak period in her fight against cancer. The brief conversation with her favourite player gave her a jolt of energy and a burst of life that'd been desperately needed after weeks of suffering through tough times.

Sadly though, the story doesn't have a happy ending.

Rebecca slipped away Monday night after a long battle with melanoma. She was just 19.

"His thoughts are with the family at this time," says Beckham's spokesman, Simon Oliveira, saying the Real Madrid star had been made aware of her passing shortly after it happened.

Today, it's difficult to see past the devastating loss of a vibrant young woman with oodles of talent and a million-dollar smile. In time though, her family and friends may find comfort in the fact that her story touched this city in a rare way and led to an amazing outpouring of affection, sympathy and generosity.

"It was something that was a lot larger than what anyone thought could happen," says her cousin, Bill Johnstone.

Offers of help and attempts to keep her spirits up seemingly came from everywhere. The Fortinos at Dundurn Plaza immediately set up donation jars that were soon weighed down with \$20 bills. A Tim Hortons where a friend of hers works began selling paper hearts for \$1 each to help the family. By yesterday morning, they'd already raised \$600. And many others in the city made donations to a trust fund set up in her name earmarked to help the family get to Kentucky for some aggressive cancer treatment that isn't available here.

The ripples went much further than the city limits though. The story was picked up by newspapers from coast to coast and discussed at length on talk radio. Major League Soccer called to see if there was something it could do. Toronto Football Club vowed to help. The Yale University soccer team sent an autographed T-shirt and pennant.

"It meant a great deal to us to reach out to her," says assistant coach George Kostelis.

Then it left North American shores through Internet blogs and Beckham fan sites, and went worldwide.

Immediately, people moved by her situation began reaching out to a girl they'd never met in a place many had never heard of. Calls and e-mails requesting information on how to make donations to the trust fund began pouring in from New Zealand, Scotland, the Netherlands and more. People even sent names of doctors and treatments -- some more unusual than others -- they believed would cure her.

"I think it's understandable that there would be a lot of interest," her cousin Bill says, citing the combination of an international celebrity and a young girl battling a horrible illness. "But the amount of interest was



Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator

Rebecca's story prompted an outpouring of love.

unbelievable."

As was the level of emotion.

Which brings us back to that McMaster student on the phone eager to raise some money for the family and do whatever she could to help.

When she was told Rebecca had died, there was silence at her end for a long time. Followed by a stumbling attempt to say something.

Then sobbing.

Visitation for Rebecca will be held tonight from 7-9 p.m. and tomorrow from 2-4 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. at Cresmount Funeral Home (322 Fennell Ave. E., between Upper Wentworth and Upper Wellington, Hamilton). Funeral services will be held Friday at 11 a.m. at St. John United Church (195 East 38th St., Hamilton). Those wishing to send condolences may also log onto www.mem.com and leave a message.

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