

Couple aids kids with neurological disorders

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Staff Reporter

Dana and Jared Florence weren't looking for recognition when they started their charity Three To Be. They were hoping to help find for a cure for cerebral palsy (CP), the neurological disorder that afflicts their triplets – Cole, Taylor and Brody.

Nevertheless, after three years of fundraising for research into the disorder, the Florences will receive the Canadian Friends of Meir Medical Center Israel's medal of merit at a gala next month, in honour of their work raising awareness about the disorder in children.

The Florence children were all diagnosed with CP at 10 months of age.

Israel's Meir Hospital serves about 800,000 people in and around Tel Aviv and is currently fundraising to expand its children's hospital and its pediatric health initiatives.

Since the birth of their children three years ago, the Florences have become passionate advocates for research into treatment and therapy for children's neurological disorders.

They've partnered with a team of medical doctors and researchers at two Toronto hospitals: SickKids and Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital, and they hope to eventually benefit from the experience of doctors at Meir Hospital as well.

Arie Raif, president of the Canadian Friends of Meir Medical Center, said once he heard about the Florences from a friend, he knew he wanted his foundation to honour their achievements.

The medal of merit is given annually to "people, who, by their own contributions, help advance the cause of humanity," Raif said, adding that he couldn't think of more worthy recipients.



The Florence family from left, Taylor, Dana, Cole, Jared and Brody.

Facing a diagnosis that would have devastated other parents, the Florences instead used their experience to effect a positive change in the world, Raif said.

Since giving birth, Dana has become a stay-at-home mom, leaving a career as a day school teacher to focus on her children's needs. In the process, she's almost singlehandedly changed the landscape for parents caring for children with neurological disorders.

In addition to looking after the kids, she also handles the day-to-day operations of Three To Be, which is on the cusp of receiving charitable status from the Canada Revenue Agency, she said.

After her children were diagnosed, Dana, 29, said she and Jared only wanted to know what they could do to help their kids overcome their disorder.

"I wanted to know what was out there in terms of a cure," she said. "I noticed a lot of adult-oriented research [on CP], but not much for kids. Why? Because there was no money, no voice for kids suffering from neurological disorders."

That's when the Florences decided to become that voice. With Jared's background as an event producer, the couple decided to start planning an annual fundraising gala.

Their inaugural Stems of Hope fundraising event was held in September last year and was attended by more than 800 people.

It raised almost \$500,000 and featured appearances by Global TV's Leslie Roberts and Anne Mroczkowski and TSN's Michael Landsberg among others.

Earlier this year, Three To Be held its Kids Care Fair to raise more funds. And Dana and Jared are planning their 2nd annual Stems of Hope event scheduled to take place Sept. 24 at the Koolhaus in Toronto.

The Florences are using funds raised to go toward the purchase of a Robotic Lokomat Pro for the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. The Lokomat is a kind of repetitive walking machine that will be used to conduct a

large, randomized cross-over research trial to evaluate improvements in walking in children with cerebral palsy who use robot-assisted gait training, the Florences said.

The Lokomat may also help children learn how to walk and gain independence, "the greatest gift for any child with motor impairment," according to the Three To Be Facebook site.

The Florences said the machine costs \$500,000, and Holland Bloorview will need another \$500,000 to staff and run the Lokomat program for a three-year term.

To date, the money raised from Three To Be's activities has also helped pay for SickKids to hire a team of six researchers to study children's neurological disorders.

Dana and Jared have both gained perspective on what's important in life.

Their first advice for other parents

raising children with neurological disorders, they said, is to never give up on the kids.

"No matter what prognoses the doctors give you, don't give up on them," Dana said, citing numerous sessions with doctors who said her kids would never reach various developmental milestones that they have all reached.

"Parents look at Three To Be as a symbol of hope and to remember not to give up. And they look at Dana as an ambassador for this cause," Jared said.

In the meantime, the Florences are modest about their Meir Medical Center award.

"We're not looking to get medals," Jared said.

Dana concurred, adding: "Being alongside [this year's other Medal of Merit award recipients], Liberal MP Joe Volpe and [orthopedic surgeon] Dr. Allan Gross, is such an honour. We're touched by it."

The Meir Hospital Israel Medal of Merit Awards ceremony will take place on June 29 at the Westin Prince Hotel. For more information, visit www.meirfriends.com.

For more about Three To Be, visit www.threetobe.org

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