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Valentine?s is Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Day

By Brock Weir

This Thursday, February 9, marks a significant anniversary for 8-year-old Tyson.

The Shelburne student, who was born with multiple heart defects, will hit the town with his parents, having a celebratory dinner marking the two years of being hospital admission free.

For many kids of the same age, keeping out of the hospital for two years is not a big thing, but it is a huge relief for the Kottlenbergs, who have helped Tyson get through three open-heart surgeries, the first being when he was just 13-days-old.

This Monday, February 13, Tyson will once again be at Town Hall as Mayor Ken Bennington formally declares Valentine's Day Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Day in Shelburne ahead of next week's Council meeting.

?It means a lot to me because I feel supported,? says mom Melissa on the significance of having the backing of her hometown when it comes to a cause so dear to her. ?A bunch of us ?heart moms' try to raise awareness on the social media front, posting articles from the SickKids foundation, posting new research that is coming out, and creating global awareness [of Congenital Heart Defects (CHD)] is our goal. Our goal is to make February 14 CHD Awareness Day all across the nation but, in the meantime, we're just trying to take over one small town and one city at a time.?

Since Mayor Bennington declared the first CHD Awareness Day in Shelburne last year, Tyson has continued to go from strength to strength. Once his cardiac condition stabilized at the age of three, Melissa says his biggest challenge has been recurring pneumonia.

But this week marks two years since his last night spent in hospital. She chalks some of this up to a shift in using natural remedies to treat her son after antibiotics started to lose their effectiveness.

?He eventually started becoming immune to antibiotics and we started to look at natural remedies, and we're using essential oils with him to help boost his immune system. Now, when he gets sick, we have the tools we need in our home to help him get through it without having to rush away to the doctors,? says Melissa. ?That has been a huge milestone for him because he can actually go to school and be around other children.?

As the ?heart moms? focus on creating global awareness of CHD, they first have their eyes set on the Province. Melissa says they would love a Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Day, Week, or Month declared Ontario-wide, as well as making inroads into hospitals.

?My number one focus right now would be for pregnant women because congenital heart defects often go undiagnosed and one of the things we can do to prevent that is to have every single baby not leave the hospital without a simple oxygen saturation test,? says Melissa. ?These are tiny machines that are already in all the hospitals hiding in cupboards, so it is not costing any more money, but if every single baby would just leave the hospital with that test, they could diagnose over half of congenital heart defects.

?In the case of our son, he was not diagnosed until he was eight days old and he was in heart failure by the time he was diagnosed and had to have his first open heart surgery at 13 days old. It was a very scary time for us and so, for me, I would just like pregnant women to be aware. I would like them to know what questions to ask at an ultrasound, and asking doctors [whether] they see a healthy four-chamber heart. I believe that I babies just got this simple little test before they left to go home, then most babies' lives would be saved because most aren't diagnosed in utero.

?I am a Christian and I believe this is the route God chose for our lives. I am not bitter about it at all, but I feel we could have been

better prepared.?