



# THE CHILDHOOD CANCER JOURNEY

Tim was 16 years old and living with his grandparents in the Philippines while his moms, Karen and Shara, were more than 14,000 km away, working on the visa application to bring him to Canada. When they received the devastating news that Tim had terminal osteosarcoma (a type of bone cancer), Shara flew to Manila to be with Tim, while Karen stayed behind, desperately trying to get through the paperwork to get Tim to Canada as quickly as possible.

# RACING AGAINST TIME: FINDING HOPE IN CANADA

by Shara Buenaventura

It started with just a small incident in December when Tim was living with my parents in the Philippines. Tim was at school, rushing up the stairs, when he hit his shin. It wasn't anything we thought to worry about, but when my mom called concerned that the swelling seemed unusual, I told her to take him to the hospital emergency room just to be safe. The X-rays showed "something suspicious." They ran the test three times. I hoped it was a mistake, but as a nurse, I knew it was cancer.

My wife, Karen, and I split the responsibilities. I flew to the Philippines to manage Tim's treatment while Karen stayed home, desperately working to get the visa application approved to bring him to Canada. The doctor told us Tim had maybe six months left to live; we were racing against time. Finally in April, Tim's visa was granted for compassionate reasons.

One of the greatest blessings for our family was that Tim's oncologist in the Philippines had completed her residency in Canada. She referred us to an oncologist in Toronto and forwarded Tim's test results so he would be ready for us when we arrived. But Tim's condition was deteriorating fast. He was barely 88 pounds after his first round of chemo—too weak to fly such a long way.

By May, Tim gained enough strength for us to bring him to Canada. Within days of landing, our POGO Interlink Nurse connected with us. She was a lifesaver. She guided us through setting up appointments with Tim's doctors and helping us

navigate the hospital system. We were introduced to resources like the POGO Financial Assistance Program. Cancer doesn't just attack your body—it drains you emotionally and financially. We had already spent ten years of savings on Tim's care in the Philippines, where every aspect of health care—from gloves to water—had to be paid for out-of-pocket. But thanks to the help we received through POGO, we could now focus on what mattered most: being there for Tim.

**“ We have so much to be thankful for. I am grateful to our POGO Interlink Nurse, and the teams at the hospital and the POGO Satellite Clinic who go above and beyond to support us, not just for Tim's treatment but for our family well-being. I am grateful to the POGO donors who, out of the kindness of their hearts, give financial support to help families they have never met. And most of all, I am grateful that cancer didn't break us. Somehow, out of this very negative situation, our bond as a family is even stronger than before.”**

– Karen Palma

Tim resumed chemotherapy and the doctor laid out the plan for surgery. How do you even begin to explain to an active 16-year-old boy that he is going to lose a limb? I told him, "They have to amputate your leg, but you'll still have a long life ahead of you." Karen and I promised him that we'd get him the best prosthetic we could.

Eventually, we were able to get much of Tim's care closer to home at the POGO Satellite Clinic at Scarborough Health Network, which gave us more time to spend together as a family. The staff there are amazing. One time when Tim had severe abdominal pain, we went to the

emergency room. After waiting a while to be seen, I thought to call upstairs to the POGO Satellite Clinic. Within minutes they had a room ready, and the nurses took excellent care of him.

Unfortunately, on Tim's 17th birthday, we received the heartbreaking news that the tumours that had spread to his lungs weren't responding to chemotherapy; they were getting bigger. Tim is on a new medication and has been referred to a clinical trial. Despite this setback, we still have hope and that's what we hold onto—one day at a time.



▶ I was really depressed when I first heard I had osteosarcoma. I thought, "People die of cancer," at least that is what I knew from the movies. It was especially hard because my parents were in Canada, and I was still in the Philippines. Then my mom came and while I was getting chemo, my visa for Canada came through. I finally felt like I was going to get better. But when we got to Toronto my oncologist told me the tumours were spreading all over my body and the only way to beat this was to amputate my leg.

When I woke up from the surgery, I could still feel my leg—I thought maybe they saved it. It took six months for me to get a prosthetic, but once that happened, my life changed completely. I started Grade 10 at a school near my house, just drama class at first, which I really enjoy. I cannot run but I can play basketball and I have made many friends.

Unfortunately, I had to leave school again because the tumours in my lungs have grown. I am back on treatment, and it makes me very weak and tired. I don't know when I will get back to my classes.

My moms and I are trying to stay positive. We think about all the obstacles I have overcome and look at this as the next challenge. When I win this challenge, I am going to be able to ride the scooter I got for my birthday, I will play basketball again and I am going to finish high school! And when I grow up, I am going to be a nurse, like my mom. I want to help other people with their challenging situations.

*Tim*

# YOU CAN MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN WITH CANCER

## 3 easy, secure ways to make your special gift today:

1. Mail in the enclosed reply card.
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