

MEET OLLIE:

AN INSPIRING 9-YEAR-OLD FROM CANADA WHO LOVES THERAPEUTIC MARTIAL ARTS, HOCKEY AND HIS DOG HOPE.

Ollie Acosta-Pickering has a special hockey puck. It's oversized and makes a rattling noise when you shake it. He has a brand new one still in the bubble wrap, but he's good with his beat-up one. "It's a little beaten up because we've used it," he says. "But this one isn't totally damaged like we can't use it."

Ollie's hockey puck could be a metaphor for himself. On the cusp of turning 10, Ollie has already faced a slew of challenges. A good-humored boy who enjoys wrestling his dog Hope and playing with friends, Ollie's health history has taken more hits than his hockey puck. Thankfully, Ollie has had a lot of "teammates" along the way, including the Martial Arts Therapists with the Heroes Circle.

Ollie's story starts in the fall of 2019, when an innocuous-looking bump turned out to be something more. Resistant to antibiotics, his family ended up at CHEO Children's Hospital in Ontario, where tests revealed Ollie had cancer. Specifically, he had ALK-positive Lymphoma, rare in the U.S. and even rarer in Canada, Ollie's home.

From there, Ollie's treatment and journey to remission had more close calls than a hockey game at play-offs. His treatment spanned children's hospitals from Toronto to Ottawa. Ollie initially had two rounds of chemotherapy, with a follow-up PET scan that showed no signs of disease. But a week after this good news, Ollie was back in the hospital; he had relapsed. His cancer was back. Ollie went through more chemotherapy, this time Intrathecal (or Spinal) Chemotherapy. Meanwhile, his optic nerves had been damaged by the lymphoma cells; after two rounds of this chemo, Ollie's vision was becoming a problem.

Then, one morning, Ollie woke up blind.

As if blindness wasn't enough, the hits kept coming. Ollie would need a stem cell transplant to survive. The family found a perfect match through the International Stem Cell Registry, but then Covid derailed these plans. Instead, his older sister Abby, with a 50% match, bravely stepped up to donate. But right before Ollie was set to receive these, he relapsed a second time. Thankfully, Ollie's team was able to use a newer, third generation TKI drug along with 13 sessions of brain and spine radiation. By his 8th birthday, Ollie was again in remission, and he successfully received a stem cell transplant that July. Ollie was finally in the clear. He was also legally blind and in a wheelchair.



That's when Ollie asked, "When can I do that karate thing?"

"That karate thing" was the Heroes Circle. Ollie's mom, Dawn, had heard about the Heroes Circle early on, but Ollie had gotten so sick, so fast, there hadn't been time. Now they had time, but wondered: could Ollie learn karate blind? Dawn went ahead and reached out to Sensei Lynn Ross. "I just thought: If you don't ask, you don't get," Dawn says.

Sensei Lynn's answer? Why not? The Heroes Circle had worked with children in wheelchairs, or with missing limbs, or other challenges, so why not blindness? The Heroes Circle and Ollie would together figure out the new challenge of teaching a blind student.

"He had a lot of anger in the beginning," says Dawn. "Senseis with the Heroes Circle spent a lot of time explaining ...how you need to harness that anger, and you need to be able to control it." Ollie definitely had his down moments, sad and angry that he was both sick and blind, afraid he couldn't be like other kids. "It was one of the first physical things he could do blind," says Dawn. "Mentally, it was a huge shift for him to feel normal, and it made him feel like he could do things." Physically, it also helped him get out of his wheelchair within a couple months.

Learning punches and kicks was Ollie's favorite, but receiving training in Power Breathing was a game-changer for follow-up treatments. Ollie had always been a sensitive kid, the type of boy who would be bothered by tags on clothing, so typical cancer treatments like needle pokes and port accesses presented a major challenge. Ollie especially hated getting accessed through his central line; just getting the bandaging off hurt. Post-transplant, his medical team offered him a deal: He could have his central line surgically removed, but he would still need to receive needle pokes for blood draws and possible blood transfusions. Now armed with training from the Heroes Circle, Ollie made his decision: He'd get the central line removed, and remain calm for his "pokes." It worked. How did he do this? "Power Breathing," Ollie says matter-of-factly. "And it went well."

"Every time since, he has been cool as a cucumber," says Dawn. Ollie never had to get the central line back in.

Dawn is impressed by both the Heroes Circle and Ollie. "It treats the whole kid," she says of the Heroes Circle. "They empower each other." Like that favorite hockey puck, Ollie's been through a lot, but he's still going. He believes that he can do everything a regular kid can do, it just takes some modifications, like that hockey puck, which makes noise so that he can "find" it, or learning how to navigate verbal instruction with Heroes Circle classes. But he also appreciates things more. "My son is certainly my greatest hero," says Dawn. "He keeps shocking me on a daily basis."

"You gotta just keep punching," Ollie says. Sure, he might to be talking about his favorite karate-style video game, but he might as well be talking about himself. After all, Dawn says, "You can't count him out."

