The World Kept Moving. So Did Matteo.

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When Matteo Totolo learned he had lymphoma at 15 years old, it wasn't the first time he had faced a serious medical challenge.

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Matteo has been part of the SickKids community since birth. Born with a rare, life-threatening condition, he received an organ transplant when he was just seven months old. Hospitals, specialists, procedures, and uncertainty were woven into the fabric of his childhood long before cancer entered the picture. Yet when the lymphoma diagnosis came in April 2025, it brought with it a new set of challenges — ones that would require Matteo and his family to leave behind their home in St. Catharines and relocate to Toronto for treatment.

When treatment brought the Totolo family to Toronto, staying together made all the difference.

For many families, a diagnosis like this immediately divides life into two parts: before and after. There is the life that existed before appointments took over the calendar and treatment schedules dictated every decision. Then there is the life that follows, where plans are postponed, routines disappear, and the future suddenly feels uncertain. For Matteo's mother, Staceyanne, one of the hardest realities wasn't simply the diagnosis itself. It was the fear that everything else that makes a teenager who they are — school, friendships, interests, goals, and everyday experiences — might quietly slip away in the background.

She remembers one of the conversations she had with Matteo in those early days.

"Life will continue outside," she told him. "Your friends will continue moving forward. That doesn't mean we can't keep moving too."

Nearly a year later, that idea still sits at the centre of how she reflects on their time at Ronald McDonald House Toronto.

"Ronald McDonald House kept Matteo balanced, hopeful, supported, and moving," she says. "Without movement — psychologically, physically, emotionally — you're not yourself."

The word movement comes up often when Staceyanne talks about that chapter of their lives. Not movement in the physical sense, but movement as a human need. The feeling that life is still unfolding. The belief that growth is still possible. The opportunity to continue becoming yourself, even while facing something extraordinarily difficult. Looking back now, she sees that what Ronald McDonald House Toronto provided was far more than proximity to the hospital. It provided momentum. It created space for Matteo to continue learning, creating, connecting, and imagining a future beyond his diagnosis.

While receiving treatment, Matteo completed his Grade 10 Math and Science courses through Ronald McDonald House Toronto School — proof that learning, growth, and possibility don't stop with a diagnosis.

While receiving treatment, Matteo completed his Grade 10 Math and Science courses through Ronald McDonald House Toronto School. There were days when treatment left him exhausted and coursework felt overwhelming. Yet he remained determined to continue. Much of that determination, he says, came from his teacher, Jermin, whose encouragement and belief in him never wavered.

"She wanted me to succeed," says Matteo. "She believed in me. I could not have done it without her."

For Matteo, earning those credits represented an important accomplishment. For his mother, it represented something even larger. Every assignment completed, every lesson finished, every conversation about school reinforced the idea that his future was still intact. Treatment may have interrupted life temporarily, but it had not stopped it. The goals Matteo had for himself still mattered. The young person he was becoming still mattered. School became one more way to maintain a connection to possibility.

That same sense of possibility emerged through another experience that would become one of the highlights of Matteo's stay: Teen Camp in the summer.

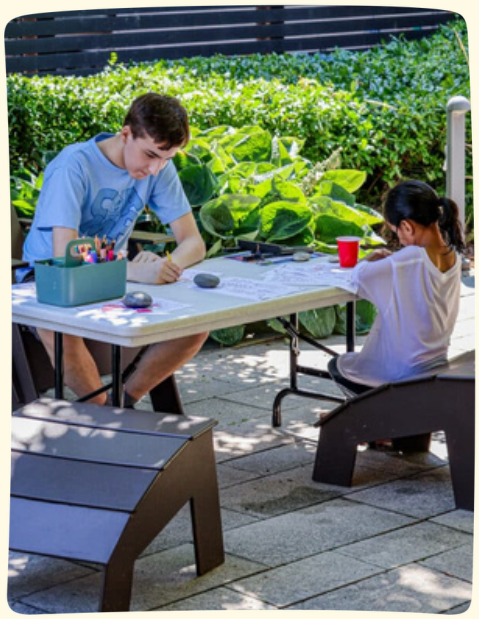
At Ronald McDonald House Toronto, camp is designed to give children and teens opportunities to play, learn, create, and connect. For Matteo, however, camp became something more than an activity to fill the hours between appointments. It became a place where he discovered new confidence in himself. A thoughtful and creative teenager with interests in architecture, design, building, and problem-solving, he quickly found himself moving beyond participation and into leadership.

Throughout the summer, Matteo helped create activities for younger campers, developed presentations, organized crafts, and worked alongside staff to help bring ideas to life. One week, he designed a pirate-themed presentation and craft activity, complete with model ships and templates he had created himself. When the activity ended, the younger campers applauded.

"I will always remember when they clapped," he says. "They wanted to participate and enjoy the activity. It made me feel happy too. I felt so happy to give back to them."

It is a simple story, but Staceyanne still remembers how much that moment meant to him. In a season when so much attention was understandably focused on what Matteo needed, summer camp at the House gave him opportunities to focus on what he could give. The younger children began seeking him out around the House. They remembered his name. They asked him for help. They looked up to him. Without realizing it, Matteo had become a mentor.

Sometimes healing looks like leading. Camp gave Matteo the chance to discover what he could give to others.



"The stories and his engagement in all activities contributed to his continual growth as a person," says Staceyanne. "It was an important and integral part of his day."

When Staceyanne talks about Ronald McDonald House Toronto today, she talks about people. She talks about the staff members who greeted them each morning. The volunteers who offered encouragement. The families who shared a hallway, a meal, or simply a knowing smile. She speaks about community not as an abstract idea but as something tangible — something felt in conversations, in small acts of kindness, and sometimes in silence.

"Everybody knows why you're there," she says. "You don't necessarily have to know the details. It's the awareness. It's a very powerful feeling."

For families facing serious childhood illness, that understanding can be difficult to find. Yet it is often what makes the greatest difference. Knowing that someone understands. Knowing that someone cares. Knowing that your child is seen as more than a patient and that your family is more than a diagnosis.

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Today, Matteo continues to move forward. His passion for architecture continues to grow. New opportunities are taking shape. New experiences are waiting for him. His medical journey will always be part of his story, but it is not the whole story.

As Matteo continues to move forward, moments of joy remain part of his family's story, too. Watch Matteo and his family experience an unforgettable surprise that brought a little extra excitement to their journey.

The journey continues. Watch Matteo and his family experience an unforgettable surprise that celebrates just how far they've come.

The whole story is about a young man who continued learning, creating, contributing, and growing through one of the most challenging periods of his life. It is about a family that discovered the power of community when they needed it most. And it is about the importance of maintaining momentum — of continuing to move forward, even when the path ahead is uncertain.

The world kept moving.

So did Matteo.

Help families keep moving forward.

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