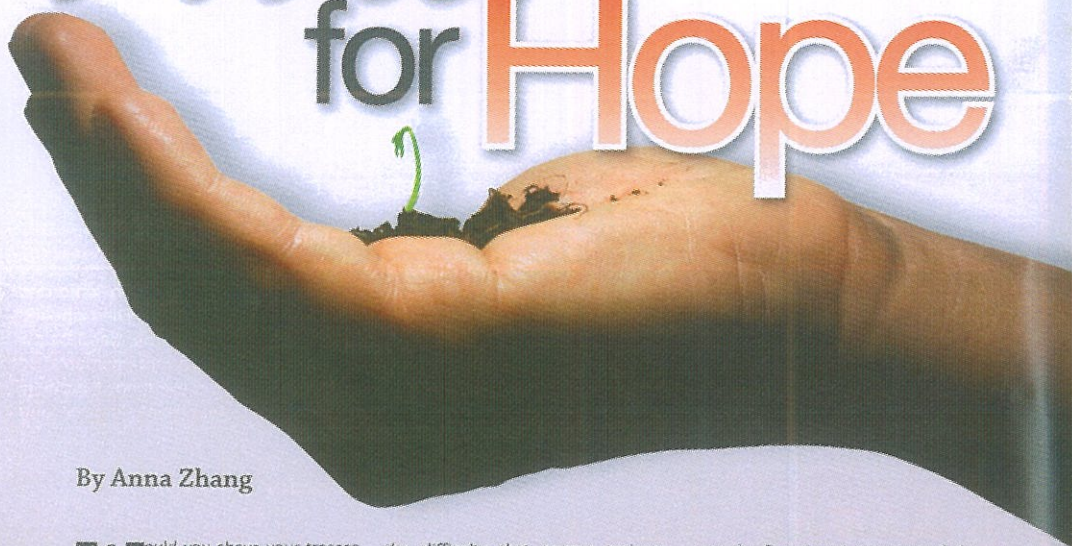


Hair for Hope



By Anna Zhang

Would you shave your tresses to support a cause you believe in?

392 people did since *Hair for Hope* (HfH) was conceptualised in 2003, to show their support for children with cancer. The public's response to the event is getting better each year, with 310 participants in 2005 alone. In addition, more sponsors have come on board. This year, HfH will be held on 6th July and participants will have their head shaved by professional hairstylists.

Birth of Hope

How did *Hair for Hope* come about? Why shave heads instead of just fund-raising? According to the project leader for the annual event, Mr Adrian Lee, HfH was conceptualised through the seeds of their understanding of

the difficulty that cancer patients, especially children, go through when they undergo cancer treatment.

In fact, Adrian's decision to be a Children Cancer Foundation (CCF) volunteer had a lot to do with this understanding; he had a childhood soccer buddy who succumbed to bone cancer. "I was privy to his fears, and at that young age, we lacked the tact to understand how we could best help him. He however, maintained a cheerful disposition throughout, and even though we could never bring ourselves to tell him about our activities after school on the field, he would still encourage us to talk about our favourite teams when we visited. He even showed us the X-rays of his amputated leg, and up to the time of his death, he was an example to us, in the manner of which he was able to live. His extraordinary story

was the first time I experienced the loss of a friend." Years later, when a university schoolmate volunteered for CCF, Adrian was persuaded to join the Foundation.

"Through *Hair for Hope*, we aim to tell each child, as well as their families, that they are not alone in the fight against cancer and to help raise funds for CCF through monetary pledges and to aid the Foundation in improving the quality of lives of patients and their families," says Adrian.

"Patients' hair loss, from treatments of cancer such as chemotherapy, is a representation of his or her courageous fight against cancer. Through the symbolic gesture of shaving our heads, we hope to lend moral support to all children with cancer, and to let them know that there is nothing wrong with being bald," he adds.

The Most Outrageous Thing I've Ever Done – Shaving My Head For A Good Cause

"Men are vain; they will check themselves out in the mirror. Women are ridiculous; they will check out their reflections in any shiny surface—mirrors, spoons, store windows, toasters, Joe Garagiola's head." — Author unknown

How does it feel to part with your crown of glory? Teo Chin Yin claims it was the most outrageous thing she has ever done...

How did you learn about the Hair for Hope project?

It all started with my friend, Ash. When she signed up for Hair for Hope a year ago, I told her she was crazy. Little did I expect that 365 days later, I would sign up too.

Did you have any initial reservations about shaving your hair?

After I signed up, I received a pledge card from CCF and I asked if there was a target for donations. The person-in-charge answered kindly, "No, no. I think the fact that you're willing to cut your hair is already a tremendous sacrifice."

Was it? At that point of time, I still didn't think I was that attached to my hair that I'd shed tears over losing it. But right after I signed up for it, I started liking my hair. It looked nice no matter which angle I looked at it. Logical conclusion: I would look awful without it! I would be lying if I say that I did not consider pulling out of the project!

Yes, the most outrageous thing I've ever done is to shave off all my hair for the *Hair for Hope* project. Furthermore, some of the reactions I received when I told people that I was going to cut off all my hair were pretty discouraging.

What made you decide to shave your hair?

I had just lost my uncle to cancer a few months before. It was really painful to see him waste away. He was not the first of my loved ones to succumb to cancer. I've always felt certain that given my family history, cancer will be the way I go too. Cancer makes both the victims and their loved ones feel helpless. I needed to do something useful and proactive.

When I told my man about it, he laughed and said immediately, "You shave, I shave." Of course, shaving is not as big a deal for a man as it is for a woman, but I still felt warm and fuzzy inside. Suddenly, I didn't mind losing my hair so much after all.

How did you feel after that?

My scalp felt naked, cold and insecure. It wanted its hair back. My two good friends, who went to the event to support me, loved the bare scalp though.

Mom screamed the moment I went home. Surprisingly, Dad was quite cool about it. He said, "Hey, it looks quite nice. Maybe I'd go shave too next year."

Soon, I became a tourist spot in my company. People started dropping by my cubicle to take photos or to rub my head. They got a great kick out of asking their friends to guess my gender

from my photo. I started to charge \$2 to be called 'Botak' and \$10 to cop a feel. All proceeds went to the CCF.

Generally, the reactions from most people I know personally were positive. I received my share of stares, glares, snickers and jeers from strangers though. The glares were alright; I simply glared back. But I also encountered troops of baboons: Guys who stared and laughed loudly. Their behaviour baffled me. What was so funny?

The most hilarious encounter I had was when an auntie came up to me in a public toilet and told me thrice that "This is a FEMALE toilet." I stared at her because I didn't know what she was getting at. She shook her head and left. Then, I looked into the mirror and went, "Ooh!" It was then that I realised you really wouldn't know what some cancer victims actually had to go through with their shorn heads until you actually experienced it yourself.



Chin Yin (right) and her partner getting their hair shaved.

All smiles: Chin Yin and her partner with their new do.

Would you do it again?

I would. So would my man. He was really proud of what I did.

What is your advice to others who are thinking of supporting the cause but feel uncomfortable with going bald?

People asked me why I bother. They couldn't see the value in what I did. Isn't it better to donate money directly instead? Well, to support cancer victims, I lost my tresses. To support me, my man lost his. I personally experienced the difference it makes to be given such moral and emotional support.

That's why I think that people, especially ladies, who are considering shaving their heads for the cause, should go for it. There's really nothing to fear. It's not like you have to cut a pound of flesh. Compared to the pain cancer victims' experience, it is nothing. As a result of the different reactions you'll receive, you become truly aware of some of the problems that patients may encounter.

When you shave your hair, your head becomes a great conversation piece. People want to know about it. If there are enough of us spreading the message, people may learn not to give cancer victims such a hard time. It's hard enough being sick, but being sick and being glared at or chased out of the toilet at the same time? Hair should be the least of their worries. They shouldn't have to deal with the prejudice that comes with a shaved head.

Need for Support

When cancer patients are first diagnosed, the first reaction is usually shock and the immediate question is "Why me?".

This was how 14-year-old Raudha felt when she was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia in October last year. Currently in Secondary Two, Raudha has to stop classes since as she gets sick and feels tired easily.

It is natural for the patient to feel swamped with many different emotions such as disbelief, fear, depression and loneliness. These emotions are part of the process patients and their family must go through in coming to terms with the illness. But hope empowers patients and their loved ones to deal with cancer even though each individual may have different expectations and outlook in life, observes Mrs Kamariah, Raudha's mother.

Mrs Kamariah is thankful that her other children are very independent and that she has managed to stay atop the struggle to balance work, home and time away at the hospital.

"I'm stronger now. I got to know other caregivers and we try to support each other. I think the most important thing is to have positive thinking, have faith in God... and prayers. I try to think positively by telling myself that Raudha will be fine. I accompany her for treatments and encourage her whenever possible because I know she may feel lonely at home. I'll sms or call her when I'm at work, read jokes to her and watch Mr Bean movies with her to cheer her up."

Mrs Kamariah feels that the CCF's *Hair for Hope* event is not just a good platform to create public awareness of children's cancer; it also encourages others to step forward and help in other ways, such as be a volunteer to help care for these children.

Although most of the activities organised by CCF are meant for younger children, Raudha enjoys the art and craft activities and playing games with the volunteers. In addition, she has also formed many new friendships with other CCF patients.

"I make craft or cards for them and hold their hands when they're going through treatment because it's painful and they're afraid. The older kids make things for me too. The younger ones will smile when they see me — they make it a point to smile to hide the pain. I have learnt the lesson of not giving up from them," says Raudha.

Inspired by her social worker, Raudha wants to be a volunteer when she grows up. "I want to bring hope to other children who are not cured yet," Raudha adds.

Bear the Beacon of Hope

If you'll like to help spread the message of hope to children with cancer, here's how:

- Sign up as a volunteer (long-term or ad-hoc basis) to care for these children through programs and events organised by CCF. Visit: www.ccf.org.sg to know more about these opportunities.
- Help spread accurate and positive childhood cancer message such as cancer is not contagious, and most childhood cancers are curable etc. Increase in public awareness of childhood cancer would generate greater empathy for these children and facilitate better social integration smooth integration with school and family, during and after treatment.
- Offer monetary aid by making a cash donation.

In all, you can help give these children a normal childhood despite being diagnosed with cancer. Show your support and encouragement, give them warmth and sunshine to make them feel that their world is still bright! ☺



Lose Your Hair, Light A Heart.



Children with cancer typically lose all of their hair during chemotherapy. In solidarity of children with cancer, "Hair for Hope" invites you to shave your head to raise awareness and funds to improve their quality of life.

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