

Arriving a stranger and leaving with 30 friends: the “Beat Retreat”

By Joe Bladek

I’m a 32-year-old mortgage broker in Barrie Ontario with a wife and young child. Two years ago I was hospitalized at Toronto General Hospital for seven weeks following cardiac arrest followed by a pulmonary valve replacement, a result of having been born with tetralogy of Fallot. This was my first heart surgery as an adult, with the previous ones at Victoria Hospital in London, ON. While in the hospital I saw a postcard for “The Beat Retreat”, a four-day camp for adults with CHD, run by the Canadian Congenital Heart Alliance (CCHA), a charitable organization started 10 years ago by four Toronto General CHD patients. The Beat Retreat is one of CCHA’s programs, whose mission is to improve the quality of life and health for people like me. I was immediately interested.

I suffered from a lot of anxiety following the cardiac arrest and I became angry at the world when people complained about the small stuff. I was seeing a counsellor because I wanted to take control of what felt to me like a severe case of PTSD, something I’ve since learned a lot of CHD patients experience. I didn’t feel I could return to my career because it’s 100% people-based, and I considered applying for disability. The Retreat sounded just like what I needed! It had been a rough year and I really needed some fun! I was hoping to meet people that had been living life with a similar heart condition and maybe learn more about my specific condition.



Celebrating a successful Polar Bear dip



Entertaining the campers in typical Joe style

When I arrived, even though I felt like a stranger, I was greeted warmly by everyone with smiles all around. Immediately I was invited to help set up the badminton net and got to know some of the people. I was blown away with everyone’s openness. I felt secure knowing that people appreciated hearing about what I had to say and about my condition. The camp even provides a CHD nurse practitioner to help us better understand our specific conditions and how to manage

them. This was extremely helpful because it provided me with answers to many unanswered questions about my health and helped me understand my condition better so I could take care of myself and also explain it to other medical professionals more intelligently. The Beat Retreat was that pivotal moment that helped me become a more confident person. Without this Retreat, I would not be where I am at today. I went back to work full time in October 2013 and have never looked back! As a matter of fact, I am so busy with business I am seeking an assistant.



Family man Joe



Performing with his band at the Mod Club in Toronto

I definitely had a lot of fun and relaxation at the retreat. The camp directors planned lots of fun and engaging activities to help us get to know one another. There was a themed costume party, a badminton tournament, group canoe trips, and an archery demonstration. On top of all this, the camp even provided a yoga instructor to help us relax our body and mind. It was such a fantastic way to spend a weekend.

Overall, I met a more than 30 amazing people, all with some sort of CHD. They were all very inviting and made me feel very welcome. My expectations were completely blown away. I met folks just like me, and that gave me the great boost of confidence I really needed and positively affected my attitude towards life. In fact I had such a great time I returned for a second year, along with my brother who also has CHD. Once again the camp was a great success, and we had a blast. My network of friends has grown because of the camp, and just last week a group of them came to hear my band play at the Mod Club in Toronto!

If you're an adult with CHD, or have a CHD child transitioning into adult CHD care, I would strongly encourage looking into this great camp.

For more information about CCHA's Beat Retreat please visit www.cchaforlife.org or email info@cchaforlife.org.