

"Peter Powerhouse" is changing the world for children with cancer

By Philadelphia Inquirer, adapted by Newsela staff

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After surviving a rare form of cancer diagnosed before he was a year old, 12-year-old Peter Zucca — pictured here with his mother, Dawn Zucca, on the family's farm in Harleysville, Pennsylvania — started the Peter Powerhouse Foundation to raise money to help support children with cancer. Photo: Michael Bryant/Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. — A local children's hospital had too few of the little wagons that young patients prefer to wheelchairs, so Peter Zucca helped raise money to buy more of them.

When he saw that most books about the challenge of childhood hearing loss "are really bad," he wrote his own.

At age 12, Peter Zucca has already had a world of experience with cancer.

Cancer struck him before his first birthday and nearly killed him.

Easing The Way For Others

The Philadelphia-area preteen uses what he has gone through to make life easier for others like him. One of the side effects with the treatment for his cancer was loss of hearing.

So he wrote a book called "Peter Learns to Listen," in which he shares his own experience with hearing-loss.

"One of my chemo drugs was ototoxic," Peter wrote. "Ototoxic is just a big medical word that means the medicine hurt my hearing."

He offers tips to hearing-impaired children: "Make sure to get the right (ear) molds, or they'll fall out when you hang upside down in a tree."

Peter certainly understands the troubles of child cancer patients — he has made 13 trips to the operating room. Before he reached age 2, he had needed 51 units of blood. Eventually, cancer took most of his right leg.

A Superhero Of Sorts

Yet Peter came out determined, a superhero of sorts, by starting the Peter Powerhouse Foundation, a year ago with his mother, Dawn, as president.

Peter has run a 5K race and he plays second base on his Little League team. He swims and dives. Peter's dream is to pitch in the major leagues, a goal he has shared with his friend David Dravecky, a former pitcher for the San Francisco Giants and San Diego Padres. He lost his throwing arm to the same kind of tumor that took Peter's leg.

Dravecky said he was touched by how fast Peter was willing and able to reach out and help other people.

It was Christmas Eve 2003 when Dennis and Dawn Zucca learned that their 10-month-old boy had a cancer that attacks the muscles. The cancer was in his pelvis and had spread to his lungs.

Peter went from crawling to dragging his body along the floor, and he could not hold down food.

Two months later, the Zuccas found themselves planning Peter's first birthday and his funeral.

"Enjoy him the best you can" their doctors advised, telling the Zuccas that Peter had just two months to live.

A Difficult Choice

Incredibly, several months later the tumor began to shrink and a doctor at a cancer hospital in New York was able to remove it. Peter was sent home with a 24 percent chance of survival, his mother said.

On Christmas Eve 2008, Peter's doctor called. "I have the best gift — you're cured," he told Peter.

In addition to hearing loss, Peter suffered nerve damage in his hands and a foot. His right leg failed to grow properly because of all the chemo and radiation. Then three years ago Peter's family decided to have it stretched longer. A sort of metal cage was attached to his leg.

"It had pins and wires in many places with a wire that went into my bones," Peter wrote in an essay that won a national contest. Peter was learning to walk again when a lump was discovered in the leg. His mother said the tumor was different from his original cancer.

Dennis and Dawn Zucca had a choice: Lose the leg, or risk losing the boy.

Dawn begged that the leg be cut off.

It wasn't easy. Peter writes: "For a while after that, I was sad most of the time."

The hardest part still, Peter said recently, is "not being able to play the same way."

Raising Funds To Help Others

He has turned his powers to helping others.

The Peter Powerhouse Foundation has raised about \$65,000, enough to buy 100 wagons for the hospital and a pair of cinema vision goggles that allow children to watch movies during treatment instead of being given medicine to sleep. Each pair costs \$48,000, and Peter is hoping to raise enough for several more.

Peter, who will head to middle school in the fall, still goes for scans every year. So far, so good, his mother says.

As for his future, he dreams of going to Princeton University and learning computer programming. But on a recent afternoon, Peter Powerhouse needed some time for fun: "I was thinking we'd play basketball."

"Peter Powerhouse" Is Changing the World for Children with Cancer." *Newsela*. 7 Sept. 2015. Web. 12 Sept. 2015.

On a SEPARATE sheet of paper, write a **PARAGRAPH** that completely answers the question. Use evidence from the text to support your response.

Superheroes are in the comics we like to read, but we also have everyday superheroes.

Explain how Peter Zucca is a real-life superhero.

*Reminder: This should be in a paragraph format with a good topic sentence and supporting details. Refer to your rubric (behind your AoW tab) to see how this will be graded.