

Community

An angel came down and picked a flower . . .

By JO ANN STEVENSON
Times staff writer

An angel came down to this green earth and picked a flower . . .

This is the inscription on the memorial stone of Gregory Tahan, the ten-year-old child who stole the hearts of Mississaugans with his display of courage and good nature during his two year battle with cancer of the bone. Greg lost one leg in emergency surgery, experienced body changes due to various types of chemotherapy and radiation, lost part of a lung in a second operation, experienced more radiation and chemotherapy and developed another tumor and spots on his lungs only a few weeks after treatment ended. Only then was it acknowledged that Greg could not be saved.

But it is the indomitable heart of this small boy that converts his story from tragedy to a victory of the human spirit. From the moment his condition was diagnosed, Greg wanted symptoms and treatments fully explained. His parents and doctors quickly understood he could cope with the truth.

HE LOST A LEG

An example of Greg's willingness to meet the disease head-on came after the sudden amputation of his leg when he was eight years old. The psychiatrist at Hospital for Sick Children feared he would be in shock the morning after the operation and asked Greg to draw him a picture. Greg refused to draw. "He didn't believe in talking around a subject," says his father, George Tahan. "Greg could be dealt with straight."

Later that week, Greg shocked the physiotherapist at the hospital when he learned to walk on his artificial leg even before it was completed, only three days after the amputation.

Greg then borrowed the incomplete leg so he could receive his award from Dixie Soccer Club as teammate of the year, without his crutches. Don McGowen, Greg's best friend, says Greg learned to swim, ride a bike and

cross-country ski with his artificial leg, and that he ran really well, flinging the leg out in front of himself.

"When people stared at him at swimming pools, Greg said not to worry. He'd stare, too, if it were someone else."

Greg learned all he could about cancer and often challenged the chief-of-staff at Hospital for Sick Children with a new discovery he had read about. "Greg always felt as if his cure was just over the page," says his father. "I wouldn't be surprised if right now his spirit is leaning over the shoulder of some researcher, prompting him in the right direction."

When Greg was asked if he would like to take part in last year's cancer drive, his response was immediate and enthusiastic. He proudly raised the flag at city hall to kick off the campaign. Later that month he accepted a cheque on behalf of the Cancer Society for the proceeds of the MacDonald's breakfast at which he had sold \$78 worth of balloons.

Greg also worked hard at the Dixie Public School hot dog sale, held on his behalf. "Many children bought more than they could eat trying to help Greg," says Betty Caldwell, a cancer volunteer and friend of the Tahan family.

This year Dixie Public School will repeat the sale in Greg's memory and the Tahans are again supplying the soft drinks.

A CELEBRATION OF LIFE

Last week, I met with Greg's family and a few friends in the living room of the Tahan home and, in reviewing the little boy's gallant fight, the evening became a celebration of his life.

His mother, Sonia, recalled that when she would get discouraged and complain that nothing seemed to be helping him, Greg would tell her that he trusted God and she should too. Sonia says Greg was a typical eight-year-old before he contracted cancer, but grew to be an exceptional ten year old. "He seemed so wise, having experienced so much," she says.

A few days before his death Greg began to cry when he was with his friend, Don. "Greg told me he wasn't afraid to die. He knew he was dying, but he was very worried about his Mom and Dad. 'If something happens to me, don't be sad,' he later told his mother. 'This is no life for me.'"

At Greg's request, the family invested in a trip to Lourdes, France in a last-ditch effort to save their son. "I'm grateful that we had those 14 days alone together," says his father, who accompanied Greg to Lourdes.

George recalls Greg's boast to his mother that he'd be walking when he left the plane. However, the trip had made him very weak and tired and the airline staff urged him to use a wheel chair. But the little boy was determined and somehow managed to walk off the plane.

When the ambulance came to Greg's home for that last trip to the hospital, Greg refused the stretcher and hopped aboard, calling for the oxygen mask. The little boy was still in charge — still directing his own life.

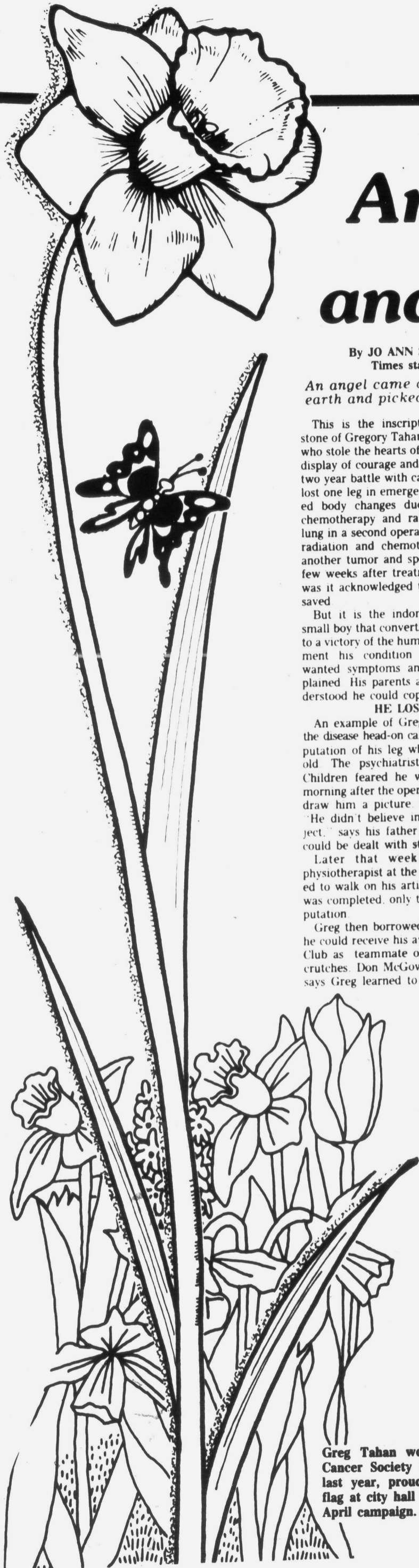
A BEQUEST

Greg asked to have his personal savings account of \$200 applied to the purchase of channel selectors for the playroom at Princess Margaret Hospital so that patients could enjoy control over the television without bothering the nurses.

Three selectors have been donated by the Tahans, and other selectors are promised by Gerrold Electronics as a result of an employee reading about Greg's wish.

Greg had also asked for a puppy, which he chose after his second operation. The dog is Sherry, a cross between a collie and a German shephard. Sherry still guards the door to Greg's room and until recently watched for his return from school.

Greg died August 15, 1978, but his spirit was so large that his presence is felt even now as the cancer campaign once again gets underway. There are many volunteers who worked beside him in last year's campaign. And they, too, remember.



Greg Tahan worked for The Cancer Society in Mississauga last year, proudly raising the flag at city hall to kick off the April campaign.

