The Spirit of Hope: Research Centre Named in Honor of Father Sean O'Sullivan
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— By Heather Pullen

Sean O'Sullivan was born at St. Joseph's Hospital on New Year's Day, 1952, the fifth of seven children of Paul and Helen O'Sullivan. As a child he was always full of ideas and mischief. Early on he demonstrated his natural skills as a communicator, entertaining his friends and pursuing a dedicated correspondence with the man who was then Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker.

In April 1983, Father Sean was admitted to St. Joseph's Hospital for tests. He had been unwell for some time and, although he thought it was just the flu or an infection, his doctors wanted to check him further. Almost immediately, they discovered he had acute leukemia, which is cancer of the bone marrow. Without immediate treatment, he would die within six weeks. Even with intensive chemotherapy, he had only a 60% chance of gaining remission — that's when the disease recedes, typically for a year or a year-and-a-half at the most.

Father Sean's chemotherapy was administered in stages throughout the spring and summer of 1983. The side effects of the treatment left him desperately ill and made him vulnerable to many infections. Just a few days after the treatment began, he almost died of a very high fever.

Everyone who cared for Father Sean during this difficult time felt the strength of his spirit. Today, his nurses and doctors still have warm memories of him. They all talk about his concern for the people around him. At a time when he was fighting for his life, he wanted to know how everyone else was doing. And when he listened, he listened with care and respect.

"He was a lovely person. We were very proud to have him as our patient."
— Nurse Marlie-Jo Perski, Clinical Teaching Unit, St. Joseph's Hospital

Eventually Father Sean’s leukemia went into remission and he went back to work. Despite his relatively weak condition, he accomplished a great deal in a short period of time. In 1985, he became publisher of the weekly newspaper, the Catholic Register. In 1986 he published his memoirs, “Both My Houses: from Politics to Priesthood”.

In 1987 he prepared a report for the Attorney General of Ontario on Advocacy for Vulnerable Adults. This report focused on problems faced by the physically or mentally handicapped, by people with psychiatric problems and by the frail elderly. It was called “You've Got a Friend” and Father Sean considered it one of the major contributions of his short lifetime.

Also, during this time, he received several honours and awards including the Order of Canada and an honorary Doctorate of Laws from his alma mater, Brock University.

Unfortunately for us all, the leukemia relapsed in November, 1988. Despite more chemotherapy and an attempted bone marrow transplant, Father Sean died on March 9, 1989 at the age of 37.

When it came time to name the new Research Centre, the planning group quickly agreed to call it the Father Sean O'Sullivan Research Centre. As a high profile cleric and former politician, he is widely known and respected. The staff of St. Joseph’s Hospital remembers him with great affection, not only for his smile, his wit and his intelligent conversation — but for his special way of making each one of us feel important. Most importantly, Father Sean symbolizes the spirit of discovery and optimism that are the hallmarks of research at St. Joseph's.

“Sean was a man of hope...
As someone fighting a life-threatening disease, he was committed to research, to ongoing discovery, to diligent, forward movement to find cures and bring healing to people... I can see that his spirit lives on in others — that his hope and his energy are still with us."
— Father Sam Restivo, Father Sean's lifelong friend