

When a child has cancer

Local 629's Claude Giroux found unexpected support in his union contract when his 14-year-old son Serge was diagnosed with cancer.

"I don't know where we would be, emotionally or financially, if we didn't have that in our collective agreement," said Claude Giroux.

A year ago April, Claude's son Serge, then 14, was diagnosed with cancer – osteogenic sarcoma, the kind that Terry Fox suffered from.

On top of the immediate stress of a terribly sick child, the diagnosis meant many trips from the family home in Sudbury to Ottawa for treatment.

The trips were frequent, often long, and usually of undetermined duration, as Serge went through many courses of chemotherapy and surgery in an effort to vanquish his disease.

"We're going through a tough time again now. Serge has to have more surgery. They have found some tumours in his lung."

It has been every parent's nightmare for Claude and his wife Nicole. Their daughter Nathalie has spent a lot of time with relatives as they travelled to support Serge.

It may seem an odd time to be grateful for your union contract, but for Claude it has been terribly important.

"The one constant for Nicole and me throughout this whole ordeal has been the reassurance of the OPS collective agreement.

"Over the last year I've had the opportunity of befriending many parents of sick children. I've met no one to date that has the protection

by **Katie FitzRandolph**

Canapress photo by J. Lightfoot



afforded us in our collective agreement. I've been quite fortunate in that my employer has provided me with paid time off when required to care for Serge's needs. I've been treated fairly with a great deal of understanding and compassion."

The special leave provisions in the contract have allowed Claude to continue his career of more than 20 years as a probation officer working with young offenders. His wife, a federal public servant, was forced to take a long-term leave of absence without pay.

In a letter to this year's OPSEU convention, read by another Local 629 member, Richard Larcher, Claude thanked delegates for a collection on his family's behalf the previous year. (This year's convention made a further contribution.)

"I know it might seem odd to you that I would even mention Article 25," Claude wrote. "However I felt the need to tell how important this benefit has been in my life.

"As our population grows older, we will become more dependent on our benefits. Such things might seem trivial to many, however when placed in a life-threatening context it becomes paramount in contributing to a greater quality of life."

Fundamentally, it has meant that Claude's family hasn't had to live with constant financial insecurity. While they have lost Nicole's income, they haven't had to worry about losing their home or feeding their children. The Ronald McDonald House in Ottawa has been a second home while they are there during Serge's treatments.

"I don't have to worry about taking time off. I don't have to worry about the money. I don't know what we would have done without that piece of the collective agreement."

No contract language will defeat Serge's cancer. But that single sentence has enabled one OPSEU family to focus on the battle that really counts. ▲

This is the sentence in the OPS contract that spares the Giroux family from financial worries:

Article 25 - LEAVE - SPECIAL
25.1 Leave of absence with pay may be granted for special or compassionate purposes to an employee for a period of:
(a) not more than six (6) months with the approval of his or her Deputy Minister; and
(b) over six (6) months upon the certificate of the Civil Service Commission and with the approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council.



Claude Giroux, his wife Nicole and daughter Nathalie with son Serge at their home in Sudbury.