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Topping the Dream

By Jim Oldfield
May 14, 2007

Christine Ichim's message, delivered to a crowd of 800 students at Upper Canada College in Toronto early this year during an event sponsored by the Aplastic Anemia and Myelodysplasia Association of Canada, was not, "Go into science or become a doctor." Instead, the message from Ichim, a third-year PhD student in medical biophysics at the University of Toronto and cancer researcher in the lab of Sunnybrook Research Institute scientist Dr. Richard Wells, was this: "Follow your dream."

She knows of what she speaks.

Since she began pursuing her dream of having an impact on the fight against cancer while still a high-school student, conducting vitamin C experiments with her brother in their parents' basement in hopes of curing her mother's leukemia, Ichim's trajectory of accomplishment inside and outside the lab has been spectacular—so much so that on May 9, 2007, in recognition



Cancer researchers, Christine Ichim and Dr. Richard Wells, in the Sunnybrook research lab. - Photo by Doug Nicholson

of her achievements, the University of Toronto presented her with the Adel S. Sedra Distinguished Graduate Award at their annual Awards of Excellence ceremony. "This award is a very big honour," says Ichim, "and it means all the more coming from U of T. If you look at U of T alumni, and the students, my peers—the titans of tomorrow—it's just very humbling to be chosen. I really didn't expect this."

Maybe she should have done. At the age of 18, Ichim rollerbladed across Canada and raised \$160,000 for leukemia research; since then, she has organized two province-wide leukemia awareness days, given 37 motivational speeches at schools and clubs across Ontario, and founded a cancer roundtable discussion forum that ran from 2002–2005, among numerous other extracurricular activities. As an MSc student at the Ontario Cancer Institute, Ichim developed a novel technique for isolating pure populations of clonogenic leukemia cells. Wells calls the technique a "fantastically clever approach," and it led to his lab's characterization of EAR2 as a key gene in the replication of leukemia cells and disease progression. It was Wells who encouraged Ichim to apply for the Sedra award, and he was instrumental in the nomination process, which included writing a letter of support. "He's an optimist," says Ichim, with a demure smile.

When she isn't doing cutting-edge cancer research or community outreach, Ichim makes time for another passion: mountaineering. To date she's scaled seven peaks that top 4,000 feet, the most recent being Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (19,340 feet). She plans to top all seven summits, the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. "It's not just a test of the body,

it's a test of the mind," she says. "It's about endurance."

She knows of what she speaks.

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research, SickKids Foundation and the estate of J.D. Crashley (via the Sunnybrook Foundation) funded Wells' and Ichim's research.

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