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Standing up for cancer prevention

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*Cleveland native creates foundation aimed at teaching kids about cancer prevention*

Rob Emrich is a stand-up guy — literally.

The 27-year-old founder/chairman of Road of Life, a nonprofit agency with a mission to educate children about cancer prevention, doesn't even have a desk chair in his downtown Columbus office. Instead, he stands up while working on his podium-mounted computer, taking phone calls, and overseeing his 12-person operation.



“We teach kids how to live better.” - Rob Emrich, founder Road of Life

Perhaps Emrich's upright work habit is emblematic of his commitment to “take a stand” against cancer. At age 7, the Shaker Heights native lost his 2-year-old sister Keren to neuroblastoma, a pediatric cancer of the nervous system. His parents, Joyce and Ron, established a concert series at the former Temple Beth Am in her memory, and Emrich wanted to continue that tradition in one form or another.

While he was in college at The Ohio State University, taking classes in philosophy and deciding on a career path, cancer hit home again — twice. His cousin, a young rabbi in Calgary, died of the disease, and soon after, his mother had a cancer scare of her own.

He decided to organize a fundraiser with the goal of making “a substantial difference” in the fight against this dreaded disease. However, while researching fundraising ideas, he learned there was “almost no work being done in the field of cancer prevention and even less for kids.” This struck a chord with the tall, blond young man who lost his little sister so long ago.

“One out of three people develop some sort of cancer in their lives,” he says, “and one out of two (cancers) can be prevented.”

So instead of creating a fundraising event, Emrich began plans for a bigger organization that would combat cancers in another way. In 2002, the enterprising young man sold his car and \$5,000 worth of stocks his grandparents had given him, hired his best friend Matt Youngner (another Shaker Heights High School grad), and started the Keren Emrich Foundation. The foundation spawned Road of Life, an organization whose mission is to “educate children about the smoking, fitness and nutrition decisions they can make to lead a healthier life.”

The ultimate goal, says Emrich, is to raise a healthier generation of young people with “a significantly lower risk of developing cancer and diseases of excess.”

Road of Life offers interested educators a free, comprehensive, 33-lesson health curriculum. Lesson #10, for example, compares the nutritional value of water and soda pop, using activities like relay races and experiments with fresh fruit.

Two full-time employees of Road of Life, a social worker and a health-education specialist, create the lessons, which are then approved by the organization’s board of directors. This fall, educators all over the country will be able to access the lessons via the Internet.

The group is also finalizing plans to provide all its health content for TeachForward, an online community developed at Harvard University. With TeachForward, educators can post their own lessons and search for, rate, and discuss lessons from teachers across the country.

It’s a misconception that all kids learn about eating their veggies and the importance of exercise during their regular gym and health classes, says Emrich. Lower income school districts, for example, don’t always make health education a priority.

“Ohio doesn’t really have health academic standards, especially for students ages 9-12,” he says.

To date, Road of Life has piloted its program in a number of schools around Columbus. Among other positive results, “we found that the program made students 26% more likely to know that smoking makes it harder to succeed at exercise and sports and 40% more likely to report eating fruits and vegetables every day,” says Emrich.

In April, the nonprofit received a \$10,000 grant, one of 50 Compassion Capital Project sub-award grants by the Ohio Governor’s Office of Faith and Community Based Initiatives. Road of Life is no stranger to grant money; in fact, most of the organization’s overhead is funded via federal grants.

In late 2005, Road of Life officially launched the “Extending the Road of Life” campaign to raise additional funds. The group’s goal is \$1.4 million, and currently “we have commitments for over half,” Emrich says.

Because the organization didn’t want to depend on special events for funding, Road to Life focuses more on major gifts and corporate sponsorships.

Emrich’s organization is currently experiencing some significant growing pains, and its founder couldn’t be prouder. He plans on opening an office in Cambridge, Mass., this fall, and he’s slowly but consistently adding new hires to his young staff.

Emrich would like to continue Road of Life’s national expansion and “create a sustainable organization without my being here,” he says. In the meantime, he’s being lauded for his work. He was recognized as one of Columbus’s “40 under 40” by Business First newspaper, and he served as a delegate at the World Health Congress. In his spare moments, Emrich also chairs the

Young Jewish Professionals board of the Columbus Jewish Federation and sits on its Overseas Allocation committee.

Emrich's Jewish background influenced his decision to start Road of Life, he says. "My parents and grandparents told me I need to be a mensch and do what's right." With the Road of Life, Rob Emrich certainly seems headed in the right direction.

*For more information, visit <http://www.roadoflife.org>.*