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Thornhill actress promotes early intervention

BY DAVID LI

According to Lauren Collins, the best part about growing up in Thornhill was the sense of closeness and belonging to the community, which has taught her the importance to caring for others.

So it's not surprising one of her key new year's resolutions is giving her time to support an important cause.

The young actress recently teamed up with the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario to leverage her celebrity status to raise awareness of the disease and promote early intervention among youth.

Today, at only 24, she has arguably become one of the most recognizable and successful young actresses to emerge from Thornhill.

The Thornlea Secondary School graduate, who is best known for her role as Paige Michalchuk on the popular CTV series, *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, remains humble and quick to share the credit with those around her.

"I'm very grateful because my family and the community have always been very supportive of my career and all my endeavours," she said.

"Also the people I met on *Degrassi* were just amazing to work with and will be my life-long friends because of the special experience that we share."

With an early start in acting at the age of nine, Ms Collins' hard

work and determination over the years combined with natural talents has rewarded her with two Gemini Award nominations, along with a Young Artist Award that was shared with the cast of *Degrassi*.

Besides her role on *Degrassi*, Ms Collins has also enjoyed roles on popular shows such as *Life with Derek* and *The Best Years*. She has also worked with a number high-profile Hollywood stars including Antonio Banderas in the movie *Take The Lead*, Robert Downey Jr. in *Charlie Bartlett* and Ashley Tisdale in *Picture This*, not to mention mega music star Drake.

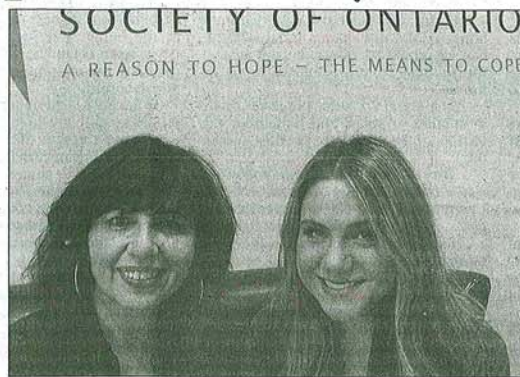
"In high school, I would sometimes have to miss a few months in a row due to filming and we would have to train on set," Ms Collins reminisced. "So I am thankful for my teachers who were responsive and helpful."

RAISING AWARENESS OF CAUSE

In addition to sharing the credit for her success to those around her, she is also eager to share her fame in support of an important cause.

Recently, Ms Collins filmed a public service advertisement for the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario to raise awareness of the disease.

Schizophrenia, which is a chronic and serious disease of the brain, involves a loss of contact with reality, making it very hard for a person to distinguish between what is real and what is not.



STAFF PHOTO/DAVID LI

TV's *Degrassi: The Next Generation* star Lauren Collins (right), and Mary Alberti, CEO of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario.

"Schizophrenia is not just an extremely rare illness as some people might think, but it actually affects one in 100 people," Ms Collins noted. "So it's really important to take away the stigma associated with the disease."

She added that it's important to raise awareness among young people to get help if they are experiencing any of the symptoms.

"Which is where I come in," she explained, "because having worked on *Degrassi*, which is a show that

reaches out to teens about real issues, I have a voice with them."

Ms Collins' efforts are aligned with the organization's key goal of early intervention, aiming to reduce treatment delays and optimize chances for recovery.

ONSET IS 13 TO 25 YEARS OLD

"Because the onset of this disease is anywhere from 13 to 25 years old, we are so thrilled that Lauren is involved, because she allows us to connect with these young peo-

ple," said Mary Alberti, CEO of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario. "When someone like Lauren lends her name to our cause, it will work to reduce a lot of the fear and stigma associated with the illness and encourage young people who need help to come forward."

The Thornhill native is more than happy to leverage her celebrity status for this important cause.

"One of the most rewarding things about being an actress is having the ability to do things like this and give back," Ms Collins pointed out.

She is excited about life after *Degrassi* and looking ahead in 2011, the actress will be reuniting with Ashley Tisdale in the TV movie, *Sharply's Fabulous Adventure*, which is expected to be released later this year. She will also continue to work with the Schizophrenia organization to raise awareness.

"Working in the entertainment business, you experience a lot of ups and downs and sometimes you get caught up in all the glamorous things. So, it's just important to be grateful and remember to do the things that are most important."

To learn more about how you can assist the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario and Lauren Collins to fight schizophrenia, visit www.schizophrenia.on.ca

David Li is a Thornhill freelance writer.

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