



Giving to give

Description

An interview with Sylvain Cossette of Cominar Real Estate Investment Trust.

By Caroline Arbour

Some 300 children are diagnosed with cancer every year in Quebec. Leucan is there for them and their families during and after this life-altering ordeal. This week, the Shaved Head Challenge for the benefit of the organization will take place for the first time at Alexis Nihon. An executive from the company that owns and manages the shopping centre committed to personally raising more than \$5,000 for the cause and to have his head shaved during the event. Why? Sylvain Cossette, executive vice-president and chief operating officer of Cominar Real Estate Investment Trust, explains his motivations in an interview with Caroline Arbour.

Mr. Cossette, what compelled you to get personally involved in the Shaved Head Challenge?

I have two children. A 17-year old boy and a 15-year old girl whose good health allows them to do whatever they want. They're very active, have every opportunity to get hurt, but the worst they've had are a few scratches. And for us, their parents, to have the energy to support them in their activities because we don't have major worries is huge. When I look at the family I have, my professional life, my health, I consider that I've been very lucky. For a long time, I didn't give enough and now maybe I'm indebted somehow. It's a way to thank God for having spared me and to help those people who haven't been spared, because it's not necessarily fair.

It's always unfair when cancer strikes, but it seems even more unfair when a child becomes ill...

And illness isn't the same for someone from the middle class and someone who lives in poverty. That also has to be taken into account. I've had the privilege of meeting families that benefit from Leucan's services because Cominar hosted the event in Quebec City and they're average people. That's important and it's good to see. Illness disproportionately affects the least wealthy and it hits them harder.

The time you spent with them moved you...

These are children who are coping with an unjust fate and families whose lives are completely dislocated. When



you spend five minutes, half an hour, half a day with them, it touches you.

You mentioned Cominar's involvement in the Challenge. What has been the extent of the company's participation?

First of all, Cominar has its head office in Quebec City and it's one of the province's largest public companies. Philanthropy plays a significant role in our corporate culture. We support children's causes and those that aim to improve the human condition, among others. The Shaved Head Challenge fits perfectly with this focus so between 2010 and 2014, we set up and held the event at our head office. It was an extraordinary activity for us because we could put a large number of our employees — about 100 — to work on organizing this day. Over five years, it raised approximately 3.1 million dollars. We then let other companies take over the organization. Cominar continues to offer technical and logistical support to the Challenge, which is currently held at Promenades Beauport, but we play a more secondary role.

What can someone who has never taken part in the Challenge expect on that day?

In Montreal, it's very fragmented. There are different time slots, in different locations, but in Quebec City, participants all get their head shaved successively over the course of a single day. What you see is striking. Before going under the razor, conditions permitting, people share why they're doing the Challenge. Most had someone in their family diagnosed with cancer, but for many others, it was a friend. It's a cause that is close to everyone and the solidarity is palpable. When you see a child arrive with a cheque in the amount of \$75.35 because he wants to help his sick friend, it's extraordinary. And what makes the success of the Shaved Head Challenge isn't people like me, who can raise significant sums of money perhaps more easily. It's people like that little boy who took the time and energy, went door to door, to collect \$75.35 from his friends.

Did you ever have your head shaved at the event in Quebec City?

Yes, this will be my third time.

Did you manage to convince colleagues, friends, family to sacrifice their hair too?

Yes. Is it hard? No. I wish my children had participated, but they're not there yet. I hold out hope that one day they'll do it. When a person you know makes a philanthropic gesture, or wants to give or do something for the greater good, it can only make an impression and influence how you'll behave later on. It's such an important example to set. I've been lucky. My boss, Michel Dallaire, is a great philanthropist and I learned the importance of giving to give, not to receive, just to give. And that's a value I'm trying to pass on.

Join Sylvain Cossette for the local challenge on September 17th at Alexis Nihon Shopping Centre.

The event will take place between 12 p.m. and 3 p.m. on the metro level. It is the 2015 edition's penultimate public shaving event. A minimum donation of \$50 is required and participants are encouraged to sign up online at tetesrasees.com, although it will be possible to register on-site the day of the event.

Read Part 1 — [Hope and respite on a razor's edge](#)

Read Part 2 — [Of cicadas and cancer](#)



Image: Caroline Arbour

[Leucan - Shaved Head Challenge 2015 - Sept. 17 at Alexis Nihon](#)

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