

## Beat goes on, so he does, too

High school student Vaughan Cooke doesn't let a painful genetic condition halt his busy music calendar

By Valerie Hill, Record staff

**KITCHENER** — Like most teenage boys, Vaughan Cooke is a gangly-limbed study of constant motion. So getting him to sit still for a couple of hours to talk about his life, his genetic illness and his music — well, it's not easy.

"I'm overdoing it timewise, with extra curricular activities," the 17-year-old French horn player admits on a rare night off. "I have something every day."

A Grade 12 Eastwood Collegiate student, Vaughan teaches piano, tutors in horn, maintains an 89-per-cent grade average — low for him, he says — plays and sings in numerous musical groups. With too many activities to recite, Vaughan must refer to a school notebook filled with the data he needs to keep his life and music ticking along.

At Eastwood, he plays in the senior band, plays in a horn quartet, plays cello in a chamber strings orchestra, and sings in the collegiate choir as well as Eastwood's Sound Machine, a techno-style choir.

Wait, there's more. Outside of school, he plays French horn with the Cambridge Community Orchestra, the Kitchener Waterloo Youth Orchestra and the orchestra's Valhalla Brass.

He also plays in the Wilfrid Laurier Wind Orchestra, the Ebytown Brass and sings with a couple of other chamber choirs. Then there were his recent terms playing with the Ontario Provincial Honour Band and the National Concert Band.

This would be an impossibly full schedule for most people, but consider that this young man has a genetic condition called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, an illness that results in an abnormal build up of collagen leading to a myriad of problems: unexpected dislocation of joints, easily damaged and stretchy skin, poor wound healing, early arthritis, memory problems and, of course, chronic pain.

He also has negative reactions to most medications and has learned to live with both discomfort and the uncertainty of when he might suddenly dislocate a shoulder or a knuckle.

His mother, Erin Harvey, says the syndrome's severity is ranked on a one-to-nine scale.

"Vaughan tested eight," she says.

He adds: "If I move the wrong way, pick something up, I can dislocate a joint."

The joint pops back in, but the damage can require months to heal.

"It's painful when it happens and more painful after the injury."

Vaughan was diagnosed in Grade 9 during a typical teenage growth spurt, but in his case the



PHILIP WALKER, WATERLOO REGION RECORD

Vaughan Cooke has a rare condition called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which can cause the dislocation of his joints and produce chronic pain. He plays the French horn with several area musical groups.

"He's the most amazing kid. He'd come to concerts even when he wasn't well." — Karrie Smith, teacher

weakened joints couldn't support the increased pressure, relegating him to a wheelchair for much of the year.

Despite the pain and decreased mobility, nothing kept Vaughan from his music and perhaps the reason can be found in the small, slightly chaotic Kitchener household he shares with his parents Erin Harvey and Jay Cooke, three cats and twin sister, Alanna, who was born with cerebral palsy.

Vaughan is an animated character who giggles and jokes and bounces around the home like a six-foot kangaroo while his mother is all calmness, knitting a scarf while surrounded by examples of her incredible needle work.

They are a creative family, a happy family and laughter rings out and Erin is also nonsense when it comes to her children.

"She doesn't let us mope around the house," says Vaughan. "My mom pushed us."

Erin insisted her children be independent; face their challenges head on without self pity.

"It's what you are dealt with," she says.

"There's no point in being angry and whining."

Alanna struggles slightly as she emerges from the family basement rec room. Smiling broadly, she admits that horses, not music, are her thing — but she obviously shares her brother's positive nature.

Karrie Smith was Vaughan's music teacher at Eastwood in Grade 9 and 10 and to say she admires the teenager is an understatement.

"He's the most amazing kid," enthuses the teacher, who also plays horn in the Cambridge Community Orchestra. "He'd come to concerts even when he wasn't well. He's so devoted, so nice to everybody."

When Vaughan could barely hold his horn, the family devised a sling for the instrument.

"We did a lot of things so I could still play," Vaughan says. "I just had to get through it."

Vaughan is recognized for his exceptional ability to understand and feel the most advanced repertoire, Smith says.

"He was very young to be playing in many groups," she adds.

Vaughan recalls feeling intimidated when he auditioned for the community bands and orchestras.

"I was so friggin' scared," he admits. "I'm just in high school." He now recognizes his own talents, thanks largely to the encouragement he has received in school.

Vaughan's years in senior public school were darkened by bullying, yet the first day he entered Eastwood, he knew things would be different.

The school, on Weber Street East near the Conestoga Parkway, is known for its arts program and had other kids like him, kids with a passion for music who ignored his physical limitations.

Vaughan's experiences with bullying were the reason he joined Working Against Youth Violence Everywhere, or WAYVE, a school-based program to fight bullying.

"That means a lot to me," he explains.

Vaughan has replaced those early days of conflict with a confidence that's born of his musical ability and the support he gets from his parents, teachers and other musicians.

He also has a drive that is unusual in one so young.

When asked why, Vaughan grows introspective.

"You've got to keep your name out there," he says. "It's all word of mouth."

He's planning on completing a fifth year of high school in an enriched arts program and he dreams of becoming a professional musician.

His former teacher, now a friend, is his biggest fan.

"He'd be having attacks (of illness) and he'd still roll his wheelchair in," Smith recalls. "He never let you down. It was unbelievable, being in all that pain."

"He's such a wonderful musician. He's a role model, for everyone."

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## OUT THERE

### How to merge . . . and other 'tips' for winter driving



Chuck Brown

Congratulations. You've survived the holiday and now it's time to put on the gloves and step into the ring for a few rounds of sparing.

And no, that's not a lame Boxing Day joke. I mean it's literally time to get out there and fight the crowds in search of post-holiday sales and spar with so-called customer service people because you want to return an ugly sweater without a receipt.

But, as they say, getting there is half the fun and here in Canada the other half of the fun is the coffee and doughnuts (and I mean actual coffee and doughnuts in the "OMG my car is out of control on black ice! And I'm loving it!" sense).

Yes, Boxing Day shopping also means winter driving — something Canadians have a lot of experience with, yet somehow seem to discover anew with the season's first snow. If driving in winter conditions is like riding a bicycle,

I'd have to believe that most of us peddle with our hands and sit on the handlebars.

To help you navigate, I've collected a few winter driving tips from some of my fellow commuters.

By watching these experienced Canadian motorists, I have learned a lot about getting around town when it's a marshmallow world — a brown, slushy, slippery, marshmallow world that smells faintly of exhaust fumes:

• **1. When merging onto a highway — slow down.**

In Canada, our Controlled Ramp Access Parkways (or CRAPS!) are known for efficiently moving millions of commuters to and from work, often at speeds in the teens of kilometres per hour.

And when it isn't rush hour, they are super efficient people movers with four, six, eight or even more lanes of traffic with drivers all imagining they are either Batman or Cole Trickle from *Days of Thunder*.

Then there's the guy ahead of me on the on ramp. He likes to take control of the pace and, rather than using the on-ramp to recklessly build speed so he can seamlessly merge into the speeding

traffic, he pumps the brakes hoping to join the highway traffic at a time when there are absolutely no other cars in sight.

Recognizing that these drivers may be slightly nervous, you should follow the next rule I learned on the road . . . call it ABP for short.

• **2. Always be passing.**

This rule applies to all situations and all circumstances. The main objective of driving is to get from Point A to Point B. However, as many of the good drivers have shown me, if Point B is such a great place, you have to try to get there before anyone else.

Therefore, if someone is driving slowly on the on ramp, pass them, thereby adding to their stress and possibly forcing them out of the race . . . er, I mean off the roads.

If someone is driving slowly in front of you on the highway, on the street or at the drive-through, pull out and pass. This is a very useful defensive driving technique in that in general you can't crash into stuff that's behind you.

• **3. Prevent global warming.**

Controversial wisdom suggests drivers can help save the planet by parking their cars. I believe that,

but only if it means I'm parking my car close to the mall entrance no matter how long I have to drive around looking for a spot.

Another way to help slow global warming is to preserve ice by leaving it on your windshield. Many drivers have shown me that it's really only necessary to scrape a tiny slot on the windshield. Some people clear the entire windshield, which makes no sense.

Our eyes are just small. They only use up about one by 10 centimetres of space, so scrape a small peephole. All that ice you leave on your windshield might not stop global warming but it can't hurt. Even Al Gore wouldn't argue with that.

• **4. Practise stops and starts.**

There's never a bad time to test the old brakes. Any time you feel like testing your stopping power, do it. There's no sense waiting for an emergency to find out your brakes aren't working.

Drivers do this to me often — sometimes they're just testing, sometimes they failed to see the orange construction pylons for the last kilometre-and-a-half and hit the brakes just as their lane runs out and sometimes they just stop if they think they saw a gopher.

• **5. Be polite at a four-way stop.** There's a lot of confusion over who has the right of way at a four way stop. The correct answer is — everyone.

So when you pull up to a four-way, do what I see many drivers do. Stop. Then wait. When another car approaches, wait to be sure the driver is going to stop. Then proceed to remain stopped. Watch the other driver. She's also being polite. She believes that since you got to the stop first, you have the right of way. You believe that if you go, you will cause a six-car pileup. Stay still. When the other driver begins slowly rolling to make sure you are going to let her go, start rolling, too. You don't want her to feel alone. When she stops, you stop, too. It's only polite. I've found that drivers do this at most four-way stops. It's a totally non-frustrating way to make new friends.

The road to the Boxing Day sales may not be entirely smooth sailing, so if you only follow one rule, make sure you wear gloves when driving. It's awful hard to give someone the finger when you're wearing mittens.

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