

26-year-old has long list of accomplishments

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Rob Emrich founded Road of Life, a nonprofit that teaches cancer prevention to fourth-graders.

He was a prep cook in an Israeli kitchen, a construction worker and a campaign manager for a woman running for a seat in the Ohio House.

Rob Emrich was a congressional page, a political and business consultant and an emergency medical technician who ran for the Columbus City Council.

He's been a molecular-genetics researcher, an educator and lecturer, and a member of committees for such causes as the Tobacco Public Policy Center and the Columbus Jewish Federation.

And Emrich founded Road of Life, a nonprofit agency that teaches cancer prevention to fourth-graders. He's 26 years old. Emrich said his ambition and strength to try new things came through a series of events that changed his perceptions of who he was and what he wanted to be.

When he was 7 years old, his 2-year-old sister, Keren, died of complications from neuroblastoma, a cancer of the nervous system.

"It was a dark cloud that was always there," said his mom, Joyce Emrich. "It changed all of us."

Rob Emrich grew up in Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland. Joyce teaches in Cleveland and his father, Ron, is a former chemist who now works as a computer analyst.

He has a brother, Michael, 23, and a sister, Alexandra, 15.

After graduating from high school in 1997, Rob Emrich decided to take a year to go to Israel and travel.

He worked on a kibbutz, a farm where all work is done collectively, in Jerusalem. On his second day there, during a trip to a popular market, three Palestinian suicide bombers dressed as women set off explosives strapped to their bodies.

Emrich took cover and was unharmed by the blasts, which killed three Israelis and an American and injured 200.

For months after his stay at the kibbutz, he said, he jumped at every loud noise.

"You have no idea how many things you take for granted," Emrich recalled thinking after he came home.

After working in construction for a few months, he took a 1,000-mile hike from Georgia to New York along the Appalachian Trail. He said the threemonth trip helped him focus.

"I was processing things," he said, "reinforcing to myself the decision to do good work that had an impact."

In 1998, he went to Ohio State University, where he majored in philosophy and premed. In 2000, he returned to Israel to study at the Ben Gurion University of the Negev. But it wasn't long before the United States imposed a travel warning, and his visit was cut short.

It was about this time that his cousin Seth died of a brain tumor. Rob Emrich said the death spurred him to raise money for cancer research.

"There's two directions you can go in," he said. "Get over your anger and be stronger, or let it affect you your whole life."

He sold his car and some stocks for about \$5,000 — just enough for startup costs — and created the Keren Emrich Foundation in his sister's name.

"I didn't want to start an organization," he said. "I just wanted to make a significant difference in cancer research."

He rounded up his friends, the "best and the brightest" he knew, and asked for their help.

Matt Youngner, who has known Emrich since they were classmates at Shaker Heights High School, didn't hesitate to join.

"It seemed cool, interesting, fun, memorable," Youngner said. "Not knowing what you're going to get paid, it's part of the adventure."

Their work led to Road of Life, the group within the foundation that teaches children how to prevent cancer. The programming is simple: Volunteers from Ohio State teach fourth-graders about smoking prevention, nutrition and exercise.

Last year, Youngner, executive director of Road of Life, and Emrich launched a pilot program at Franklinton Alternative and Hubbard elementary schools.

Michael Emrich, who is studying political science and international studies at Ohio State, set up a Road of Life chapter at OSU and rounded up volunteers.

"I've learned so much from my brother and Matt," Michael Emrich said. "It's just the idea of turning an idealist thought into reality."

Rob Emrich said he hopes to spread the program to all fourth-graders in Columbus this fall and eventually across Ohio.

Since 2002, Road of Life has raised more than \$500,000 to support cancer-prevention programming. Emrich walked 312 miles from Cincinnati to Cleveland to raise money for the program.

"He's devoted the best years of his life to a cause while most people his age are just trying to make money," his mother said. "He was born with this strong spirit, and it just gets stronger."

His success has led a number of groups to ask him to join their boards and committees.

In his spare time, Emrich goes to the gym, hangs out with friends in his Italian Village apartment, hikes with his dog, Calvin, and keeps up with politics.

In August, he was one of 29 candidates to turn in applications for the City Council seat left open by Richard W. Sensenbrenner's departure. Although he didn't make the cut, Emrich said he still sees politics in his future.

But for right now, he's content with the journey that Road of Life has in store for him.

Send suggestions for profiles to lifestories@dispatch.com or to Mark Somerson, The Dispatch, 34 S. 3rd St., Columbus 43215.

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