

THON 2016

Delta Kappa Epsilon to dance in memory of Andrew Garwood

Sam Ruland | The Daily Collegian Feb 19, 2016 (5)



Andrew Garwood poses with his girlfriend Geordann Weik on the floor at THON 2015. Courtesy of Steve Garwood

Walking into the Bryce Jordan Center as a freshman, Andrew Garwood had no idea what to expect — no idea what THON really was or what it would one day mean to him.

“You have to see it yourself, with your own eyes, to really understand it,” Andrew’s mother Terri said.

The 2012 Penn State Interfraternity Council/Panhellenic Dance Marathon took place over the course of 46 hours spanning from Feb. 17 to Feb. 19.

That first Friday of the THON weekend marked Andrew’s 19th birthday.

There was no bitterness in Andrew’s demeanor. He did not complain or grumble at the fact his birthday would be spent standing on his feet for hours all in pursuit of a cure — all for the kids.

Rather, Andrew called his parents before the night was over and told them that this was the best birthday he has ever had.

In three years, Andrew would represent his fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, dancing 46 hours for the kids.

Today, his fraternity will take the floor dancing in memory of him.

Andrew grew up in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, so saying Penn State is a long commute is a bit of an understatement.

When choosing a college, his father Steve said Andrew was looking for a change.

The first time Andrew visited Happy Valley was in April of his senior year. He knew after that first visit in August he would be coming back with a packed car ready to move into his new home.

Stepping out of the car on move-in day, Terri said Andrew was in awe.

Andrew Gardwood poses with his parents Steve and Terri on the floor during THON 2015. Courtesy of Steve Garwood

“We got out of the car and he said to me, ‘Mom, isn’t it beautiful’ and I said, ‘Yeah, it’s really nice,’ and he just said ‘Isn’t it awesome nestled in the Nittany Mountain?’” Terri said. “I looked at him and said ‘Who are you, and where’s Andrew?’”

From the beginning of his freshman year, studying management information systems, Andrew immediately did what he could to make the most of his college experience.

He joined Delta Kappa Epsilon and was not hesitant to become an active member — one of the most active members, his fraternity brother Ryan DeCoste said.

“Our THON chairs could always count on Andrew to be one of the first people to sign up for a canning weekend,” Ryan (senior-supply chain and information systems) said. “Brothers looked forward to being on his trip because they knew he would bring energy to the weekend.”

At the beginning of the fall 2014 semester, Andrew was serving his second term as Delta Kappa Epsilon president and had little knowledge that he was about to enter his own battle with the same enemy he fought for the past three years for the kids — cancer.

One day, Andrew began to complain about headaches.

“People get headaches all the time and you usually don’t think much of it,” his girlfriend Geordann Weik said. “But the day we went to the hospital, I just noticed he was out of it.”

Geordann (graduate-speech pathology) recounted the day as she sat running her fingers across a silver necklace with a diamond-studded heart — a gift given to her by Andrew.

Andrew picked Geordann up from classes that day so they could make a quick stop at Walmart. She didn’t think this day would be any different from the many she had spent with Andrew.

But it was.

“When he was driving I had to tell him to stop at a red light and slow down when we were coming up to other cars, which was weird to me,” Geordann said. “When we got to Walmart I noticed that he had sort of this lack of coordination and a really bad headache throughout the whole day, so later that same day I called the advice nurse at [University Health Services].”

The nurse Geordann spoke with informed her to take Andrew to the hospital.

There had been much resistance by Andrew to go to the hospital until that point.

After receiving a CT scan at Mount Nittany Medical Center, Andrew was told he would have to undergo surgery to remove what the neurosurgeon had thought was an infection that spread to his brain, like an abscess.

Terri and Steve drove up immediately to inquire about their son’s condition.

Ten days after his surgery, Andrew laid in his hospital bed hoping for a speedy recovery.

His parents hoped their son would be declared healthy, and his girlfriend hoped her boyfriend would soon be outside of the confining four walls of his hospital room.

However, the news they received would cause them all to hold their breath for another 16 months.

Andrew was diagnosed with brain cancer.

“That day Andrew made the decision to face it head on,” Geordann said.

Strength and Honor.

Those were the words Andrew chose to have placed on the back of his 2015 dancer shirt. Those were the words he chose to carry with him as he took on the floor for the kids, for 46 hours.

“It was his motivation for the weekend,” Delta Kappa Epsilon member Blake Wilhelmy said. “To show us all that this was about so much more than just him. It’s about the kids, and for cancer research everywhere — for anyone who is going through it.”

Andrew was nominated to represent his fraternity dancing on the floor for THON 2015 and automatically accepted, despite the worry his own family and friends had regarding his health.

Doctors cleared Andrew to participate in the dance marathon despite their advice saying that 46 hours is straining on anyone, especially someone battling brain cancer.

Terri and Steve held their opinions and their worry about the situation to themselves. They knew how important it was to their son to do this.

“When Andrew told me, I asked him if he thought that was a really good idea with his health, and before he could answer it my husband said ‘What if you do this and your tumor comes back?’ and Andrew said, ‘What if I don’t do it and it comes back?’” Terri said.

“What could we say to that?” Steve said.

So Andrew began to prepare.

He met with his dancer relations committee member Megan Hittle and was not hesitant to talk about his own condition.

Megan (junior-biology) had already known about Andrew’s condition through mutual friends. Any nervousness she had in taking on the responsibility of her dancer being ill completely disappeared once she met with Andrew, at Chipotle, for the first time.

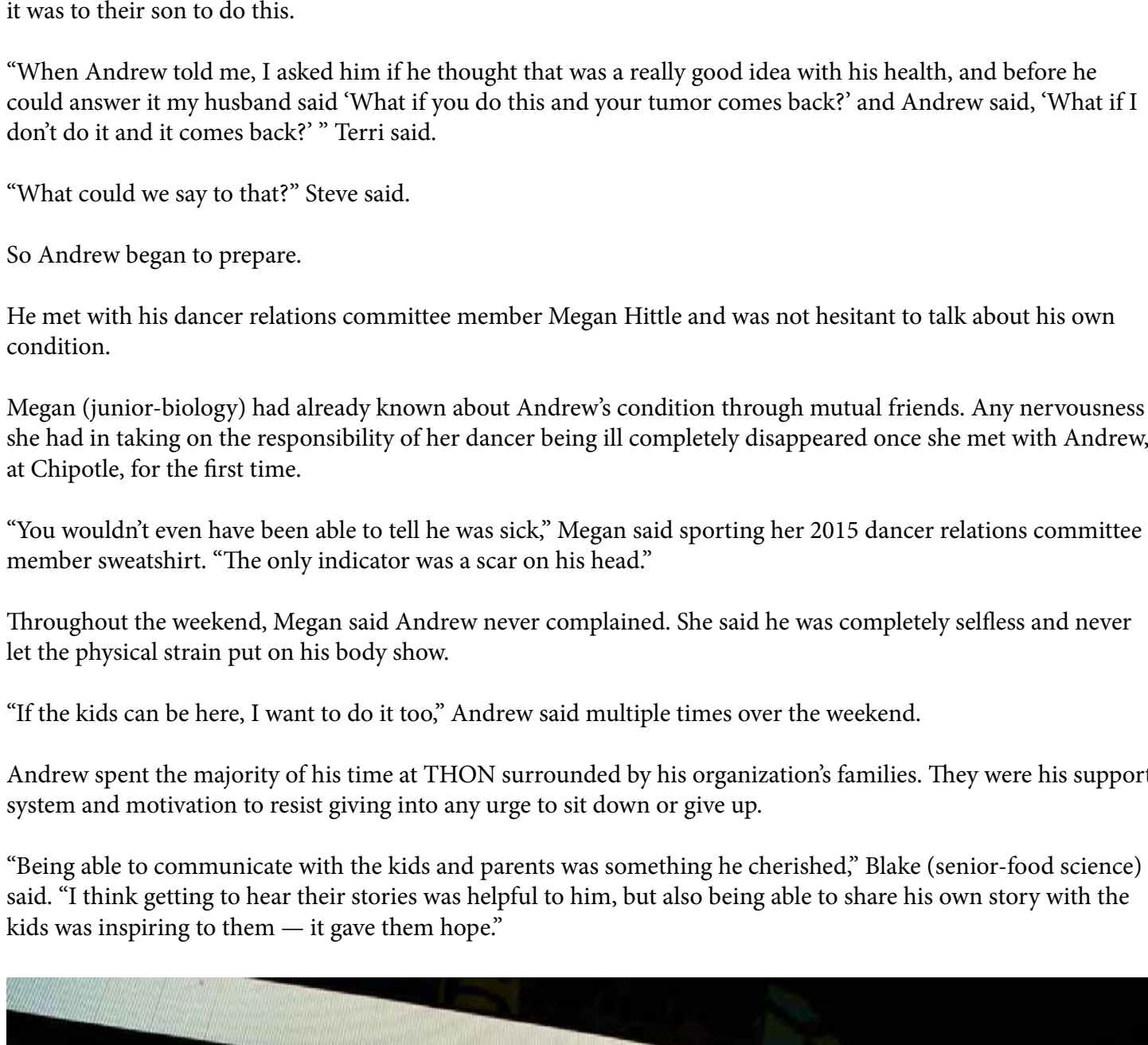
“You wouldn’t even have been able to tell he was sick,” Megan said sporting her 2015 dancer relations committee member sweatshirt. “The only indicator was a scar on his head.”

Throughout the weekend, on his body Andrew never complained. She said he was completely selfless and never let the physical strain put on his body show.

“If the kids can be here, I want to do it too,” Andrew said multiple times over the weekend.

Andrew spent the majority of his time at THON surrounded by his organization’s families. They were his support system and motivation to resist giving into any urge to sit down or give up.

“Being able to communicate with the kids and parents was something he cherished,” Blake (senior-food science) said. “I think getting to hear their stories was helpful to him, but also being able to share his own story with the kids was inspiring to them — it gave them hope.”



A member of Delta Kappa Epsilon holds a sign cheering on Andrew Garwood while he danced in THON 2015. Courtesy of Delta Kappa Epsilon

Andrew was constantly supported throughout the weekend.

Along with his dancer relations committee member, Geordann also danced that year.

“I was nervous going into the weekend at first,” Geordann said. “I had heard stories of couples dancing together before and that one usually tends to lean on the other more.”

However, that was not the case with Geordann and Andrew.

“I never saw him hit a wall,” Geordann said. “He kept himself occupied and played games, or danced with me, or he even had a catch with a football and his fraternity brothers that were in the stands.”

Terri and Steve said Andrew was “crazy confident” when they visited him on the floor — he seemed just fine to them — maybe a little tired, but again never complaining.

Andrew went off the floor during the family speakers. He needed some time to himself.

But then Kayla Nakonechni’s family approached the stage to speak. She had the same kind of cancer Andrew had.

Hearing the things Kayla had to say, and the aspirations she had and the things she was still doing was motivation for Andrew. When he heard her start to speak, he left the hallway and went straight back to the floor to meet her as she descended the stage.

“It made him want to share his story more,” Geordann said. “He appreciated her sharing her story.”

Andrew completed all 46 hours.

When the marathon was over, he was just as calm and collected as when he had started, Geordann said.

“I remember once we got back I was exhausted and we just fell asleep instantly,” Geordann said. “We didn’t wake up for anything until we ordered pizza at 2 a.m. and then we fell back asleep till morning.”

Andrew was determined to keep living a normal life as long as possible.

Even while in the hospital, his positivity still radiated.

His fraternity brothers visited him frequently and even became regular favorites of the nurses.

“When I first went to visit him, I was admittedly nervous and honestly scared for him,” Ryan said. “However, even from the start of his battle Andrew never let cancer change his personality.”

One day in particular, 15 or so brothers came to the hospital ready with red Solo Cups.

They set up the cups for Andrew and played water pong right there in his hospital room with him, Blake said.

Some of Geordann’s favorite dates with Andrew took place in those walls she once dreaded so much.

“I would go to my classes and then go to the hospital and sit with him and talk. It was my release,” Geordann said. “It was time spent together where we could just sit and be with each other.”

Andrew relapsed in the spring of 2015, just a few weeks after completing the 46 hour dance marathon.

Just before spring break Andrew suffered a seizure causing his doctors to advise him to return home to Illinois. An MRI was done and revealed Andrew’s condition was worsening.

Determined to beat cancer and get his degree, Andrew went back to Penn State for the 2015 summer session. He was there for about three weeks until a doctor’s appointment confirmed he would need to undergo more treatments at home in Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

On Jan. 12, Andrew’s battle with cancer came to an end.

“You never saw Andrew exhibit any emotion like ‘woe is me’ or ‘I’m too young’ or ‘why did this happen to me,’” Steve said.

Although this will be the first year since 2012 Andrew is not physically present at THON, he will be there in spirit.

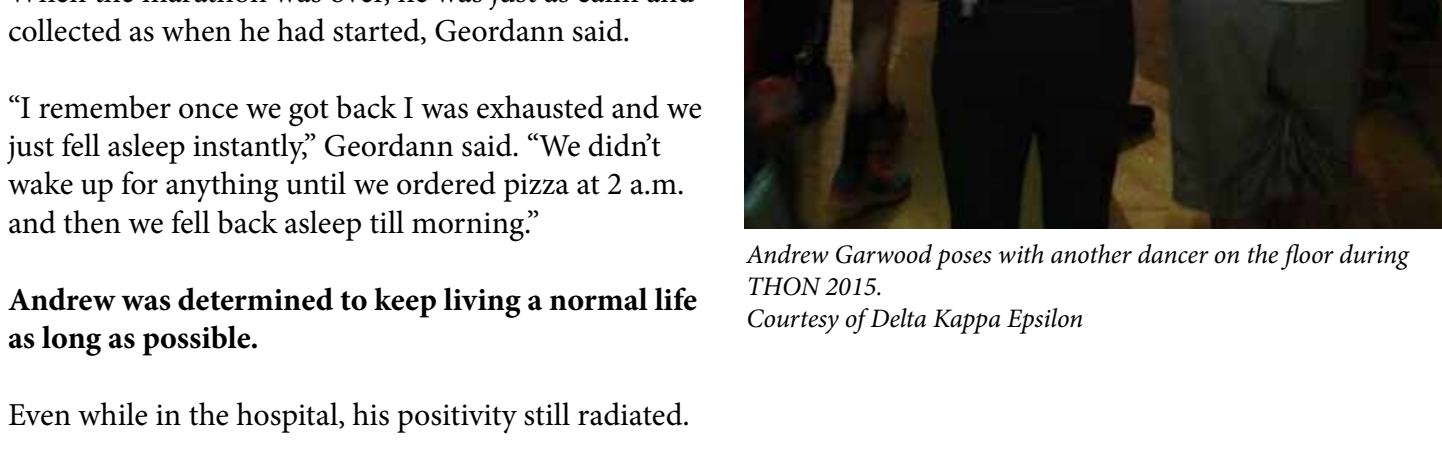
Thousands of dollars have been donated to THON in Andrew’s name, Blake said.

Terri and Steve will be on the floor this weekend honoring their son and supporting the Delta Kappa Epsilon dancers who this year are dancing not only for the kids, but also for Andrew.

“We wouldn’t dream of missing it,” Terri said. “Not after how much it meant to Andrew.”

When asked about Andrew’s battle, Blake shifted in his seat and sat forward, eyes locked.

“He didn’t lose his battle to cancer,” Blake said. “He won by the way he lived.”



Andrew Garwood poses with another dancer on the floor during THON 2015. Courtesy of Delta Kappa Epsilon