

News > Penn State THON dancers remember why they're dancing

Penn State THON dancers remember why they're dancing

By Sara Dignan 10:42 am EDT February 21, 2016



“You have cancer.”

Those are the three words Andrew Garwood was committed to eradicating as a dancer in Penn State University’s dance marathon philanthropy, THON. But in September 2014, his doctor told him those same three words.

Garwood died on Jan. 12. But between his diagnosis and his death, he raised money and awareness for pediatric cancer patients by dancing in Penn State’s annual THON — a 46-hour dance marathon which the school claims to be the largest student-run philanthropy in the world.

However, Garwood’s passion for this cause didn’t start after his own brain cancer diagnosis. He participated in THON during his freshman and sophomore years, prior to his diagnosis.

Andrew Garwood takes a break from dancing at THON 2015 to pose for a photo with his parents, Steve and Terri Garwood. (Courtesy: Steve Garwood)

Andrew Garwood takes a break from dancing at

THON 2015 to pose for a photo with his parents, Steve and Terri Garwood. (Courtesy: Steve Garwood)

“Not only was he a loving, selfless person, but he was incredibly goofy, always having a good time and could put a smile on just about anyone’s face,” Geordann Weik, Garwood’s girlfriend, tells USA TODAY College. “None of this changed after being diagnosed with cancer — he became even more of a leader and continued to be a light in everyone’s lives.”

Garwood’s legacy with THON will live on through the 2016 dance marathon, which ends today. Weik says a memorial video commemorating Garwood’s life will be played at the close of today’s event.

“He will be my motivation in dancing this year,” says Blake Wilhelmy, Garwood’s friend and fraternity brother. “I only wish he could be there with me, but I know he’ll be looking down on me, cheering me on the whole time.”

THON dancer Lily Beatty says Garwood’s death to brain cancer serves as inspiration and motivation for the THON community.

“This serves as a constant reminder to the community to continue the fight,” Beatty says.

Andrew Garwood flashes a smile at the no-sitting, no-sleeping, 46-hour dance marathon in 2015, in the midst of his own battle with cancer. (Courtesy: Geordann Weik)

Andrew Garwood flashes a smile at the no-sitting, no-sleeping, 46-hour dance marathon in 2015, in the midst of his own battle with cancer. (Courtesy: Geordann Weik)



Andrew Garwood flashes a smile at the no-sitting, no-sleeping, 46-hour dance marathon in 2015, in the midst of his own battle with cancer. (Courtesy: Geordann Weik)



Andrew Garwood takes a break from dancing at THON 2015 to pose for a photo with his parents, Steve and Terri Garwood. (Courtesy: Steve Garwood)

Although 2015 was Garwood’s third year attending THON, it was his first time participating for the full 46 hours in the no-sitting, no-sleeping dance marathon. At the time, Garwood had just wrapped up his first round of chemotherapy, and his doctor advised him not to participate in the full marathon, according to Weik. Despite the doctor’s recommendation, friends say Garwood stood for every one of those 46 hours and was a driving force for other participants.

“Seeing him make it through the full 46 hours last year when he was battling cancer himself is to date the most impressive act I’ve seen in my life,” Wilhelmy says. “Even when I got down on the floor to see him, he was in better shape than I was, and if there is any one person that could’ve done what he did, it was Andrew.”

As the president of Delta Kappa Epsilon, Garwood teamed up with his fraternity brothers and the sisters of Sigma Alpha to raise money for THON 2015. Together, the fraternity and sorority raised over \$45,000 thousand, contributing to the grand total of \$13 million raised during last year’s event.

Garwood’s influence on THON has not ended because of his death, his family says. In lieu of flowers at his funeral, Garwood’s family requested donations to THON instead. But Garwood’s efforts to eradicate pediatric cancer are only a fraction of his legacy, his parents say.

“We all aspire to live more like Andrew,” Steve Garwood says of his son’s legacy. “He would want us to live life to the fullest and continue to be loving, selfless, kind to others and leading by example.”

Sara Dignan is a University of Maryland student and a USA TODAY College correspondent.