



Morale volunteer has family reason for being part of Thon

By KATHERINE LACKEY

Feature story written for Comm 462

Feb. 25, 2008

As a fourth-grader, Eileen Barno knew she would go to Penn State after she attended the university's Dance Marathon with her bald, second-grade sister, a cancer survivor, in tow.

"We were up front learning the line dance with everybody and the morale captain who was teaching it was some really crazy bubbly redhead who winked at me throughout the dance," she said. "And I think that was part of my drive — I wanted to be one of the morale captains some year and be up there teaching the line dance."

This year, Eileen (freshman-kinesiology) attended her tenth Thon, an event that has had a major impact not only on her sister's life, but her own as well. It was the first time Eileen appeared at Thon not as a member of a Thon family, but as a student.

Eileen even took the first step toward achieving the goal she first dreamed of in fourth grade by becoming a moraler, one of the students who support the more than 700 dancers during the 46-hour, no-sitting, no-sleeping, event.

"Just growing up around Thon, it really was one of the main reasons I came to Penn State because I wanted to be part of it from the student perspective," she said. "And that's why I wanted to be on the morale committee — I'd grown up seeing what the dancers needed on the floor."

The nation's largest student-run philanthropy, Penn State's Interfraternity Council/Panhellenic Dance Marathon, or Thon, involves the combined efforts of 15,000 students, including 3,000 committee volunteers. This year, it raised \$6.6 million for the Four Diamonds Fund, up from \$5.2 million in 2007. In total, Thon has raised more than \$52 million for the organization throughout its 36 years.

The Four Diamonds Fund is an organization that provides financial and emotional support for families who have children being treated for cancer at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center. The money raised at Thon helps to pay for the hospital costs of children battling cancer, including expensive chemotherapy treatments, as well as the cost of transportation for families not located within the immediate Hershey area.

After one of Eileen's twin sisters, Emily, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in 1997, the Four Diamonds Fund helped the Barno family. Two years of treatment at the Hershey Medical Center drove Emily's leukemia into remission and the Camp Hill family attended Thon for the first time in 1999.

That year Eileen learned her first line dance, one she stills remembers today. The line dance is a synchronized dance, changed each year, with references to Penn State and current events, which is performed each hour during Thon in an effort to motivate the dancers.

"It was just a really neat experience," she said, "especially now as a Penn State student, I get to look back at all those years when I was the cute kid running around on the floor with my little sister."

One of the memories that stands out in Eileen's mind is when the 2002 line dance referenced her and her twin sisters in one of its lines, "Dancing to 'N Sync," which came from the previous year's Thon when the girls were 'N Sync fans.

This year, Eileen, with her addictive personality and incredible energy, had a different focus—keeping her dancer motivated during the 46-hour event. Eileen, working in four-hour shifts split with other moralers, brought gifts, including massage toys, squirt guns, and the infamous big balls that are thrown around during Thon, to her dancer, a Penn State student whom she called “a little pint size thing.”

The toughest time for the dancers comes in the early Sunday morning hours, Eileen said, when some even begin to hallucinate.

“We’re supposed to go along with their hallucinations — so if they’re like ‘I see a purple monkey surfing across the room,’ we’re supposed to be like ‘Oh, I see him too! Let’s go find him, let’s go surf with him,’ — because if we tell them that they’re crazy, that they’re seeing things, they could have a panic attack,” she said.

For Brian Barno, father of Eileen and identical twins, Emily and Erin, the Four Diamonds Fund provided him the greatest gift of all: “An opportunity to have our child.”

“It’s just a shock, how are we going to deal with this? And the Four Diamonds Fund is there to say, ‘We’re going to help you through it,’ ” Brian said. “More importantly, when Emily was going back there for ongoing chemotherapy there were people there to hold her hand, people there to help you through the process.”

Currently, Brian is on the Four Diamonds Fund Advisory Board, which is in charge of allocating the money raised by Thon to help the families of children with cancer as well as fund pediatric cancer research.

When Thon families attend their first dance, they can become overwhelmed by the amount of support they receive from Penn State students, Brian said.

“These kids don’t even know my family and they’re spending untold amount of hours and time for my kid,” he said. “It brings people to a point of tears.”

During the first Thon she attended, Carole Barno, the mother of the three girls, was in awe, she said.

“Why would all these kids, who are in college, who don’t know us, give up an entire weekend, not to mention the months and months of preparation?” she said. “Why would they give up all that time for people they don’t know? They’re college students; they’re supposed to be selfish.”

Despite undergoing two years of treatment, Emily Barno, 16, remembers Thon more than she remembers being sick, she said.

“Those first years, we knew the line dances like the back of our hands,” she said. “When I think of cancer, the first thing I think of is Thon. I don’t remember spending hours and hours at the hospital.”

Now, a high school junior, Emily is considering coming to Penn State and is planning on studying biology because she’s considering going into pediatrics. Eileen is playing a role in her sister’s college decision.

As for Eileen, she’s right where she belongs.

“I think it was destined all along for me to be here,” she said.