

SLUG: CANCER CHILD

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STATE COLLEGE, Pa. -- Katie Austin's voice was confident when she said cancer was one of the best things to ever happen to her. She ran her hand through her long, blonde hair that wasn't there nearly 10 years ago, unconsciously showing a new appreciation for it.

Austin, from Lancaster, Pa., is a junior at Penn State University majoring in biobehavioral health. She said she knew as soon as she stepped into her first fund-raising dance marathon in 2000—eight months after her diagnosis at age 11—that she wanted to be a Penn State student. She wanted to see Thon, as the Interfraternity Council/Panhellenic Dance Marathon is called, from the side of the student volunteers.

Thon is an annual 46-hour dance marathon and yearlong, multimillion-dollar fund-raiser at Penn State to benefit pediatric cancer patients – like Austin -- through the Four Diamonds Fund.

Sitting in the university's student center and wearing a Thon sweatshirt, she made it clear that she kept her word. Austin has become one of Thon's leaders.

Her journey began on June 30, 1999, in Lancaster, when she was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia, the most common form of leukemia in children. There are about 4,000 new diagnoses of ALL each year, but a common disease doesn't render it a forgiving one.

She suffered a fast-growing cancer in which lymphocytes, cells that fight infection, are not formed. Leukemia cells grow quickly in such cases and crowd out the body's red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets.

As a result, at 11, Austin underwent intense chemotherapy treatments to kill the cancer cells, finishing on Nov. 11, 2001, after nearly two and a half years.

“She did little or no complaining,” said her father, Dennis Austin. Both he and her mother, Eileen, who still live in Lancaster, said Katie always kept a positive attitude. “Chemotherapy is rough on a kid, but Katie was so very brave through the whole ordeal,” said Eileen.

Katie impressed her mother the morning her hair began to fall out. “Katie came downstairs and she had taken it upon herself to completely shave her head,” she explained. “That's when I knew that no matter what, Katie was not going to let cancer get the best of her.”

However, Katie gave credit to her family, rather than her own resilience, and called her parents her heroes. “They have offered me support in so many ways and helped me through so many challenges.”

She said that while the experience was emotionally hard on her family members, including an older sister who was married and an older brother stationed in Alaska at the time, they supported her and are now even stronger.

When Katie was diagnosed, it didn't take long for the Four Diamonds Fund to step in with assistance.

“Literally minutes after my diagnosis, my social worker sat down with my parents. Not only were they going to cover us financially ... they would make sure that

our family had the emotional support needed as well,” she explained. Any cancer patient treated at Penn State Hershey Children’s Hospital automatically becomes a Four Diamonds child, she added.

Her parents said they were amazed. “You can just concentrate on doing whatever has to be done to make your child well,” said Eileen, who never saw a medical bill.

More than 2,000 families have been supported by the Four Diamonds Fund since 1972. All Thon proceeds benefit the fund, and most of the total raised — more than \$59 million — has gone to Four Diamonds families.

The Austins’ first Thon in 2000 was the climax of Katie’s story. “We were overwhelmed,” Dennis said, recalling the emotional experience. The family has attended Thon every year since.

When it came time for Katie to apply to college, the decision was a no-brainer. Penn State was the only school to which she applied because of Thon.

Her freshman year, Katie earned a position as a family relations captain for Thon. The purpose of family relations is to work closely with Four Diamonds families and keep them informed and involved with Thon events. Other volunteers didn’t know then that she was a former Four Diamonds child.

She served as a captain again her sophomore year. For Thon 2009, Katie became family relations overall chairperson, overseeing a committee of 20 family relations captains and the families with whom they worked.

Katie could finally help other suffering children and families as she had been helped a decade earlier.

Thon 2009, held in February, raised a record \$7,490,133.87. Recalling the moment that the total was revealed at the end of Thon, Katie said, “Even thinking about it brings tears to my eyes.”

But the money raised wasn’t the only positive part of Thon 2009, according to Eileen. “To see Katie come full circle from Four Diamonds child to family relations overall, it just brought back so many memories of the journey we had been through the past 10 years.”

Katie celebrated seven years off treatment and cancer-free in November 2008. Despite her strenuous treatments, she remains optimistic about her experience.

She said because of organizations like the Four Diamonds Fund and Thon, cancer — despite being one of the worse experiences of her life — has been one of the best. These organizations and her illness have made her the person she is today.

“No matter what, I would never change anything.”