

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

# KENTUCKY

## Alumni

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DanceBlue Turns 10!

# DanceBlue:

Student-run philanthropy event has raised \$6.58 million for pediatric cancer patients and research at the Markey Cancer Center

By Robin Roenker



# A decade of dancing



*Photo: DanceBlue*

When 800-plus students take to the floor of Memorial Coliseum on Valentine's Day for DanceBlue 2015, they'll be marking the 10th anniversary of what has become the largest student-run philanthropy event in the Southeastern Conference.

The event's success is staggering. In just nine years, DanceBlue — the annual, 24-hour no sitting, no sleeping dance marathon — has become a vital and universally-loved part of the University of Kentucky undergraduate experience. It has fostered lifelong friendships between UK students and pediatric cancer patients and their families. Perhaps most tangibly of all, it has raised more than \$6.58 million to support research and patient care at UK's DanceBlue Kentucky Children's Hospital Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Clinic and at the Markey Cancer Center.

"I have been overwhelmed by DanceBlue's impressive growth year after year," says Dr. Lars Wagner '91 MED, chief of pediatric hematology and oncology within the Kentucky Children's Hospital. "When I came here two years ago, one of the pieces about this job that attracted me the most was the remarkable level of community support that exists for the pediatric oncology program here, thanks to efforts like DanceBlue."

Funds from DanceBlue are distributed to the DanceBlue KCH Pediatric Oncology/Hematology Clinic to support both basic and clinical research on childhood cancers, as well as to help fund areas of need for the pediatric patients and their



Photo: Courtesy Doug Mynear

**Jarrett Mynear earned the Prudential Spirit of Community Award, honoring young people for their volunteer service.**

families — including everything from gas cards and food vouchers to temporary housing for patients traveling from far away. Matching money from the Kentucky Cigarette Excise tax supports cancer research at the UK Markey Cancer Center.

DanceBlue proceeds are overseen and collected through the group's Golden Matrix Fund, an account in the UK Department of Pediatrics. The money currently supports the salaries for a child life specialist, who works with patients on play therapy and coping strategies to make potentially scary treatments easier to handle, and a school intervention specialist, who serves as an advocate for patients as they transition back to their schools following treatment. Other patient services, such as neuropsychology testing, which are important but not always covered by

health insurance, are also funded through DanceBlue, Wagner says.

Additionally, DanceBlue funds support the clinic's "Beads for Courage" program, which awards patients beads after each stage of their treatment — whether surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation — and gives out medals when their treatments are completed. "That's a low-cost, high-impact thing," says Wagner. "But all the kids love it. It's a tangible marker of their treatment and how far they've come."

On a larger scale, in 2012, DanceBlue made a four-year, \$1 million pledge to help renovate and expand the UK Pediatric Hematology and Oncology Clinic. As a result, the clinic was renamed the DanceBlue Kentucky Children's Hospital Hematology/Oncology Clinic.

While all of these successes are remarkable, what makes UK Sr. Director of Fundraising Programs Susannah Denomme '78 AS, '83 CI and pediatric cancer support advocate Jennifer Mynear '79 '83 ED — the two women who first brought the idea of a dance marathon to campus 10 years ago — proudest of all is the way that DanceBlue is helping foster a generation of UK philanthropists and leaders.

"We both knew from the very beginning that students had to be in charge of everything," says Denomme. "It could not be staff led. We wanted students to build it. From day one, it became something that they owned. That has been the key to DanceBlue's success."



Photo: DanceBlue

**The first DanceBlue marathon raised more than \$123,000.**



**From left, Jarrett's mother Jennifer Mynear, the first DanceBlue Chairwoman Emily Pfeifer and then-UK College of Medicine Director of Development Susannah Denomme were elated at DanceBlue's success.**

### Finding inspiration

For Jennifer Mynear, DanceBlue represents another lasting legacy for her son, Jarrett, who died in October 2002 at age 13, after a long battle with cancer. He had started the hugely-successful Jarrett's Joy Cart, which is still ongoing, to provide new toys to children during their hospital stays.

After her son's passing, Mynear and her husband Doug Mynear '75 '77 EN wanted to find another way to honor Jarrett's dedication to helping others. She met with Denomme, then-development director for UK College of Medicine, and the Jarrett Mynear Fund was created with a goal of raising money to renovate UK's pediatric hematology and oncology clinic. The fund ultimately raised \$370,000, far beyond their expectations, and with additional fundraising by the Kentucky Children's Hospital, the clinic was revamped and rededicated in April 2004.

Mynear, whom Denomme calls a "tireless crusader," wanted to do more. Denomme's daughter, Carolyn, then a sophomore at Pennsylvania State University, told her about THON, Penn State's annual 48-hour dance marathon to support pediatric cancer patients.

The pair thought the timing was right to bring a similar idea to UK's campus. In 2004 through 2005, they began holding informational meetings with key student leadership groups to scope out student interest.

"After each of those meetings, we would have two or three students come up to us afterward, and tell us that they wanted to be a part of this," Denomme recalls.

Then-UK junior Emily Pfeifer '06 BE was one of those students. When she heard Jennifer and Susannah's presentation in fall 2004, Pfeifer had just successfully undergone treatment for thyroid cancer and learned that her father, Fred Pfeifer '81 EN was battling lung cancer.

"After I heard their presentation, I got up and chased Jennifer and Susannah down the hall," says Pfeifer, who went on to serve on the DanceBlue steering committee and as DanceBlue's first overall chairwoman in 2005-2006. "Jarrett's last message of finding strength in yourself by giving to others resonates with so many people. It certainly resonated with me. I told them, 'I am meant to help you with this. I think we can do something great.'"

### Empowering students

"The best thing about DanceBlue is that it is completely student run. It

would never have worked otherwise," says Mynear, who named DanceBlue's Golden Matrix Fund in honor of Jarrett. (Gold is both the color associated with childhood cancer support and was also Jarrett's favorite color. "The Matrix" was his favorite movie and the term also connotes parts coming together to form a greater whole.)

All parts coming together for the greater good — that's precisely what DanceBlue has done for the UK community. Each year, all 600-plus registered student organizations are invited to participate. Last year, more than 100 student groups were represented.

At the first DanceBlue marathon, roughly 175 dancers participated, raising over \$123,000. Now, the event annually maxes out the building capacity of Memorial Coliseum, with 800-plus dancers on the floor and an arena of supporters filling the stands to cheer them on.

Every hour on the hour during the marathon, DanceBlue dancers join in a synchronized line dance, with chants of "FTK" ("For The Kids") to keep them motivated. Toward the end of the marathon, a talent show featuring patients at the pediatric oncology clinic and a memorial to those who have been lost help keep the focus on the families.

During the first DanceBlue talent show, a young cancer patient sang "You Raise Me Up" and there was not a dry eye in the place, recalls Pfeifer, who now works with Salient, an asset management firm in Houston, Texas. "You looked around, and you realized, everyone was so com-



**DanceBlue 2005 had roughly 175 dancers; DanceBlue 2014 maxed at 800-plus.**

mitted to this cause,” she says. “That, for me, was the moment when I knew we were on to something that was going to be a lasting part of the UK experience.”

Now, like attending football and basketball games, involvement with DanceBlue in one fashion or another is synonymous with life as a UK undergraduate. A billboard promoting DanceBlue hangs at Blue Grass Airport. On College Game Day, coverage of UK always includes mention of DanceBlue.

For New York-based designer Amberlee Isabella '07 DES, who served as DanceBlue's second overall chairwoman in 2007, watching DanceBlue evolve into a not-to-be-missed part of the UK experience has been a thrill. “To see how it has become part of UK's culture is something that I'm incredibly proud of,” she says. “Friends sometimes ask me, when I go back to attend the marathons, ‘Aren't you upset that the students now don't know your name?’ And I say, ‘Are you kidding me? It's not about our names. It's about DanceBlue, which is so much bigger than any of us.’”

The emotional power of the 24-hour marathon is impossible to describe, and it represents the culmination of a year's worth of work by an army of volunteers, says Jonathan York, DanceBlue's 2015 overall chairman.

This year's event will be pulled together by over 145 committee members who will organize and lead every aspect



Photo: DanceBlue

**UK President Eli Capilouto playfully joined DanceBlue 2014 teams.**

of the event programming, from planning the hour-by-hour activities that dancers will take part in to corporate relations work soliciting donations from area businesses. “We like to say we're working 365 days a year for the kids. The marathon is a celebration of that year-round work,” York says.

People routinely tell Denomme that they never could have imagined how moving the marathon is, until they see it for the first time themselves.

“Sororities and fraternities are dancing alongside the Robinson Scholars and the Honors Program,” says Denomme. “It brings the entire campus together. Invari-

ably, on their evaluations after the event, students will say this is the best thing they've ever done in their life. They may sign up initially because it's fun. But going through the marathon changes them. It teaches them about philanthropy. It teaches them about giving back to the larger community. And, it teaches them how to take on and excel in an array of leadership roles.”

### Life-changing for students

DanceBlue 2013 marked the first time the marathon broke the \$1 million, single-year fundraising mark. The moment that the extra “1” was unveiled in the total tally was one that DanceBlue 2013 chairman Ethan Ritter will never forget.

“That will be one of my favorite memories for the rest of my life. It was just an amazing feeling,” says Ritter '13 AFE, who is now attending medical school at UK.

(Last year, DanceBlue upped the ante even more, bringing in \$1.436 million in 2014.)

Like many of the students who've been involved with DanceBlue, Ritter says the event changed him. “DanceBlue showed me the incredible impact a community can have when united for one cause. I think that I'll carry that same sense of responsibility for advocacy with me as I become a physician,” he says.



Photo: DanceBlue

**The slogan ‘For The Kids’ — FTK — keeps the students energized.**

Serving as the family relations chairwoman for the first DanceBlue helped Shelby Dehner '06 SW find her professional calling. After college, Dehner worked for three years as a pediatric oncology social worker at UK and is now the executive director of Kids Cancer Alliance, a nonprofit that offers camps and other programs for childhood cancer patients.

Lexington attorney Preston Worley '07 AS, '10 LAW stays actively involved today with DanceBlue as chairman of the Golden Matrix Fund Advisory Council. "The years I spent with DanceBlue were absolutely the best thing I did during my time on campus, and one of the better things I've done in my life," he says.

And for Erin Priddy Wright '09 AS, now in a surgery residency at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, DanceBlue led to a rather surprising outcome — marriage. Priddy met her husband, Joey Wright '08 EN, '12 LAW, when both were serving on the DanceBlue 2008 Executive Committee.

### More than the money

While York hopes DanceBlue 2015 will continue the marathon's impressive, unbroken streak of bringing in more money than the year before, his primary goal, he says, is making sure this year is the best yet for patients at the pediatric oncology clinic and their families.

Student leaders say the relationships DanceBlue builds between the patients and UK students are what sets DanceBlue apart from other charity events.

"You can raise money all day long, but



**Coach John Calipari speaks to the crowd with words of encouragement.**

the family relations aspect is, to me, the heart and soul of DanceBlue. The student bonds that are formed with the families are what makes DanceBlue so special and unique," says Dehner.

Each year, roughly 30 patients in the pediatric oncology clinic are "adopted" by UK DanceBlue student groups. The students take them out for fun at the movies or to get pizza, visit them at the clinic during their treatments and contact them weekly through emails, cards or phone calls to let them know they're being thought about and supported.

Each week roughly 30 volunteers on DanceBlue's Family Relations committee volunteer in 1-2 hour shifts to keep kids company in the clinic while they undergo their treatments, which can take anywhere from 30 minutes to eight hours.

"The goal of our committee is to help get these kids away from cancer for a bit — to help them feel like just a regular

kid," says Zac Brown, DanceBlue's Family Relations chairman for 2015.

Brown's hours volunteering in the pediatric oncology clinic are his favorite part of his week. "Being with the kids in the clinic is just the best. No two days are the same. Some days, I'll hang out with a teenager, and we'll have a real conversation about what he's going through," Brown says. "Other days, I'll be in there with a two-year-old playing peekaboo, just trying to make her laugh."

The family relations work DanceBlue does throughout the year "matters hugely," Wagner says. "From the parents' side of things, it tells them there is a community out there supporting them during what is a very scary time. From the kids' perspective, the visits are just fun. Over the summer, when UK students are away from campus, all the kids in the clinic can ask about is, 'When are the DanceBlue students coming back?'" ■

## Association and UK Alumni Clubs support DanceBlue

Early on, the UK Alumni Association and its club network around the country were on board with the goals of DanceBlue. The association and members found ways to support the effort, both monetarily and through letters of encouragement written to DanceBlue team members.

Last year, the association and about 18 alumni clubs raised more than \$20,000 for DanceBlue through UK men's basketball game watch parties and individual donations. The association and clubs would like to expand that outreach this coming year.

Association members like Nick Phelps, president of the UK Young Alumni Club in Louisville, are enthusiastically embracing the event. In addition to spearheading the Louisville club's efforts, he has also encouraged other clubs to participate, sug-

gesting how to organize game watch parties and adding raffles or silent auctions, for example, to bring in more funds.

"More and more students are going to be leaving UK every year with a very special place for DanceBlue in their hearts," Phelps says. "This is a way to help them stay involved with DanceBlue and connect with their local alumni club, so it's a win-win."

In addition, the UK Alumni Association offers a yearly reception for grads who are former DanceBlue participants to help keep team members connected and as a way to say 'thank you' for their efforts.

Visit [www.ukalumni.net/events](http://www.ukalumni.net/events) to see when your club is planning a DanceBlue activity.