

Dance Marathon raises \$701,493.16 'for the kids'

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FSU students leave it all on the dance floor as they fundraise for cancer research at Dance Marathon from March 22-24. / Robert Gill/ FSView

Florida State University's 18th annual Dance Marathon (DM) shattered personal records, boasting a staggering total of \$701,493.16, and it's all FTK, that is, "for the kids," the event's motto.

Clad in vibrant rainbow tutus, neon frat tanks and spirit hoods, over 1,800 students devoted their weekend, energy and altruism to fundraising for Children's Miracle Network during philanthropy held at Leon County Civic Center from March 22-24.

Fundraising efforts continued nonstop throughout three days and both of the two dance shifts, concluding at Sunday's closing ceremony, where organizers revealed the grand total and the winners of the group pairing competition. The winning pairing was Delta Gamma, Zeta Beta

Tau, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and Phi Kappa Psi. The highest individual dancer's contribution to the cause was over \$17,000, breaking yet another fundraising record.

Surpassing last year's \$584,000, Dance Marathon 2013's over \$700,000 grand total illustrated a landmark 20 percent growth, unseen in DM's at other universities.

Children's Miracle Network's director of youth marketing Zac Johnson traveled from Salt Lake City, Utah to praise the success of FSU's DM and said that Florida State's involvement serves as a national example, especially in light of its final total.

"To have Florida State as one of our premier dance marathons is such a huge boon to the national movement," Johnson said. "I love coming here because, for me, doing the tomahawk chop or yelling 'Go 'Noles' is just the same as saying 'FTK.'"

Half of all funds raised will go to Shands Children's Hospital in Gainesville while the remaining half will directly benefit Tallahassee area hospitals through the FSU College of Medicine's pediatric outreach program.

Over the past 17 years, Florida State has raised upwards of \$3.8 million for the Children's Miracle Network.

DM 2013 was the culmination of a year's planning and Lorne Hiller, External Director for DM, called his work for the event a "labor of love."

He noted that this philanthropy thrives on a human element and is particularly moving because past beneficiaries of their fundraising are actually present, as dancers get to interact with the children they helped save.

"Unlike a lot of other philanthropies where you just raise for a national cause, here you actually get to see and meet those kids who are receiving that money," Hiller said. "It's very selfless and I think that's the best part because it's all for the kids. We love being here for them."

Armed with this FTK motto in mind, dancers dutifully fought exhaustion throughout 20 consecutive hours of standing and dancing.

The sentimental testimonials and earnest expressions of gratitude of six miracle families were added motivation for dancers to keep forging on.

Kayla Mills, a miracle child, was afflicted with life threatening meconium poisoning as a newborn.

Her treatment at Shands made the difference and is the reason why she is alive and completely healthy today.

Kayla is just one success story.

Her father Ed Mills spoke to the FSU dancers, offering words of encouragement and thanking them for the impact of FSU's fundraising which kept his daughter alive.

"I want you guys to know how much it means to the kids that you guys are here," Mills addressed the dancers. "Be proud of what you guys are doing. We really do appreciate you."

While the miracle families shared their stories, dancers dropped to a knee in respect. It's the closest participants get to sitting during the marathon, aside from time purchased to sit in the designated "Lazy Boy" area.

Spencer Wickenden, a current public relations assistant for the event, said listening to the families' stories inspired her continued DM involvement after first participating as a dancer with her sorority, Kappa Delta.

"It's just an overwhelming feeling when you're dancing for 15-16 hours and then a family comes on stage," Wickenden said. "We had a miracle family speak when I was a dancer and the mom said she was a dancer when she went to Florida State. That's when I knew I needed to get more involved."

Greek letters galore, participants in large part represented FSU's social Greek community, the Lady Spirit Hunters, service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega and some individual dancers made their presence known as well.

Dancers were kept entertained and awake by rousing performances from FSU's finest such as the Tyler Denning Band, Tall Natives, the Flying High Circus, the Golden Girls, Seminole Dance Force and FSU cheerleaders which boosted morale.

FSU's basketball team Michael Snaer also made an appearance during the first shift to help promote donations.

Between line dances to Top 40 tunes, DM dancers stayed on their feet with the help of a silent disco courtesy of Tallahassee EDM, a drag show during which fraternity brothers dressed as flamboyantly caricatured women, a tacky prom dress fashion show, four square games and even a poker tournament.

Dancers made significant contributions of their time, sacrificing their weekends to benefit local hospitals, although the latter portion of each dance shift was a rave to rival the Ultra Music Festival.

"We do get caught up as college students with our friends, our different organizations and the things we have going on," Wickenden said, "but when you press pause on that and you walk into the civic center during Dance Marathon, DM becomes your life. This is your world for those 20 hours and what you're doing is saving a child's life."