

Dance marathon's mission bridges the FSU-UF rivalry

The February event is all about helping sick children

By Kate Schofield

Democrat writer

It's all for the kids and their families. Once a year, more than 150 high schools and colleges across the country participate in Dance Marathon, a fundraiser where students dance for up to two straight days to raise money for the Children's Miracle Network Hospital in their region.

Both Florida State University and the University of Florida host student-run Dance Marathon events to benefit Shands Hospital for Children.

Every year, UF sends some students to visit the FSU dance and FSU sends some students to the UF dance. The two rival universities also share ideas and host fundraisers together. However, each event is unique.

"We have two very separate, individual events," said Meagan Flint, the overall director for the FSU Dance Marathon. "We (FSU) are a little unique (in that) we give to two places."

Half of the money raised by FSU goes to Shands Hospital for Children and the other half goes to the FSU College of Medicine's Pediatric Outreach Program, which benefits youngsters in Gadsden County.

FSU raised more than \$470,000 with last year's event. The Dance Marathon at FSU divides 15,000 dancers into two 20-hour dance shifts. Because of the number of participants, the event is held at the

See DANCE, Page 2



DEMOCRAT FILES

Rachel Skibicki, left, and Kate Boudet, right, participate in a nearly 10-minute synchronized dance during the Florida State University Dance Marathon last year. Students raised more than \$400,000 during the event benefitting Children's Miracle Network.



DEMOCRAT FILES

Haley Hall holds 27-month-old Zander Wyant during the 14th annual FSU Dance Marathon at the Civic Center.

Article Continued Below

[See DANCE on Page B02](#)

Dance

From Page 1

Civic Center. This year the event will take place from Feb. 17 to 19.

For Flint, a family and health senior from Palm City, the event is more than just a fun night of dancing with friends.

"I fell in love with Dance Marathon my freshman year," she said. "You get to interact with families. It is so much more; it can hit home for you with a story from a family."

About 25 families come to the event and share their stories. Last year, Flint said she was emotional when the final tally was announced. "All the work you put into it is worth it when you are hearing the crowd's reaction and (see) families crying," she said.

Each year, students from both FSU and UF get to tour the Shands Hospital for Children and are told what their money went toward.

"You see where the money goes and that it does benefit," said Patrick Spook, the internal communications chair at UF.

The Tallahassee native and Chiles High School graduate participated in the student-run dance his freshman year and has been part of the event ever since. It was the stories of the families that really touched him, he said. The event tries to make the dance special for the 30 families that come to O'Connell Center to share their stories.

"It has been called better than Christmas and better than Disney," he said. "When (the families) say things like that, it brings a smile to my face."

The UF event will take place from March 31 to April 1. Eight hundred dancers participate in the 26.2 hour marathon. In the past 17 years, UF's marathon has raised more than \$4.5 million. All the proceeds go to Shands Hospital for Children.

"For me, I see Shands," said Eden Joyner, the public relations chair for the UF event. "It is on our campus, so close to Gainesville and so close to UF. It feels real, touching, something that is so meaningful. The miracle kids motivate you. They are real stories with real backgrounds."

Joyner, a Leon High School graduate, danced the first year and knew she would go back.

"It is one of the best selfless endeavors of college students that has the most success," she said. "It's a great time. Usually (the children sharing their stories) are the most powerful moments. It is a reminder of why you are there and why you are standing. It is a party with a good cause."

For more information about the FSU or UF marathon or to make a donation go to <http://d.m.fsu.edu> / or www.

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