

720 Minutes: UMaine Bearfest dance marathon unites students for a cause

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Four years, \$130,000. That's how much money the University of Maine's Bearfest, an annual 12-hour dance marathon held at the New Balance Student Recreation and Fitness Center, has raised for charity.

But this marathon isn't just about the dancing, the music or the food — Orono House of Pizza donated 100 pizzas to this party — it's for the kids.

Throughout the four years, the event has raised funds for the Children's Miracle Network of Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems. This year, the fundraiser was ambitious, with goals of raising \$75,000 for the charity. They missed their goal, raising \$70,600 as of Sunday morning.

"Getting UMaine students involved with philanthropy and seeing them so excited about giving to the less fortunate, to helping out these kids, that's the real spark that I need to get interested in something like [Bearfest]," Cameron Barrilleaux, a co-chair for Bearfest, said.

Barrilleaux has been involved in planning Bearfest both of his years at UMaine. However, this was his first time in charge of the event's executive committee. Despite being a graduate assistant in Student Organizations and Leader Development, for him, it's not about being in charge. He cares about seeing students take the lead for a cause.

Barrilleaux works with 19 students on his executive committee, who he says are the ones calling all the shots.

"They're amazing, and just watching them develop and grow, that's why I came into this field for, and you really get to see that throughout the whole Bearfest process," he said.

As a group, the committee is responsible for getting sponsors, organizing the logistics of the event and, ultimately, making the magic happen. And what is that magic? According to Barrilleaux, it's bringing so many people together for a good reason.

"A lot of people are coming together that probably wouldn't have come together on a daily basis, but they're coming together for this goal," Barrilleaux said.

Coming together in times of need is all too familiar for Barrilleaux, who is from New Orleans. He likened the moral of Bearfest to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In its time of need, hundreds of thousands helped that city regain its strength. Now, in their time of need, Barrilleaux said UMaine can make a positive impact in the lives of children who suffer from cancer.

"Whoever says winning isn't everything has never had to fight for their life in a hospital. This goes so much further than cancer," he said.

“I look at myself right now in the position I’m at right now, and I enjoy all of it. Why not give these kids a chance to get to where everybody at this university is at: in college, having the time of their life and learning so much and growing as an individual?” Barrilleaux said. “Why can’t every kid have that?”

“Last year, I had a chance to spend some of the time with one of the children there and seeing the impact this event has is amazing. Through the event we throw and the money we raise, Bearfest has a lasting impact throughout the year,” Joshua Bellinger, the other co-chair of Bearfest, said.

“At the event, when the teams adopt a kid, you see the smiles on their faces, and you won’t forget those smiles, you know that they’re genuine,” Barrilleaux said.

Barrilleaux attributed the continued success of Bearfest to recognition from student groups on campus. Campus Activities and Student Engagement, Student Government, and the Division of Student Life as a whole have all made contributions to the event.

“[They] have really seen the buy-in of this event and where it can be in five years, opposed to where it is now,” Barrilleaux said. “There are live dance marathons that are clearing a million dollars around the nation. There’s no reason we can’t get to that,” he said. “We have to make those moves now to set up ourselves for the future.”

The future looks bright when taking into account the number of students signed up to dance. Last year’s Bearfest saw a registration of more than 700, and an actual turnout of around 550. This year’s festival expected to turn out at least that amount and, as of March 18, had raised at least \$28,000, according to Bellinger.

But in the end, it’s not all about money and numbers. It’s about making connections with and helping those in need, uniting the community as one.

“What I like about Bearfest is the creation of a campus tradition which unites a diverse array of people for a mutual cause,” Molly Hunt, a sociology student at UMaine who participated in the event, said. “It’s been inspiring to see so many organizations contribute in their own ways, as well as receive such a positive response from friends and family through their generous donations.”

And the morale touches more than the dancers. Even the DJs are inspired.

“Watching people dance and enjoy themselves, that’s all the payment I need, especially for such a great cause like the Children’s Miracle Network,” Justin Zang, one of the DJs at this year’s Bearfest, said.

“So many kids just want to be a kid and yet their fighting cancer every day,” Barrilleaux said. “Most of them at that age don’t know what they’re fighting for, but they’re fighting anyways.”

“It shows that no matter how diverse we are with our interests, and our religions, and our racial differences and our ethnic differences... those 500 people have one thing in common,” Barrilleaux said. “We can work on that and move forward with that to make this grow.”

Joshua Bellinger is the Advertising Manager for The Maine Campus.