



THE LONG RACE

On a spring day at 5 p.m. in her Tower A dorm, Monica Henderson began her routine—right sock, left sock, right shoe, left shoe—and tied her running sneakers. Bending down to touch her toes, she commenced her lengthy stretching sequence, needed for muscles she says are always tight. Then she tied her shoes one more time—just to make sure they were secure.

Henderson is among hundreds of biology and sociology majors at the University of Pittsburgh, but the 18-year-old is anything but standard. She just ran across the United States in support of the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults. Henderson started at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco with her relay team on June 17 and finished at the Brooklyn Bridge on Aug. 4.

UCF helps alleviate the hardships young adults battling cancer commonly face. It hosts the annual 4K for Cancer—that “K” is for thousand, not kilometers—during which participants cover a total of 4,500 miles to raise money for the fund.

Henderson, who is going into her sophomore year, says many of the runners don’t have a personal connection to cancer. But for her, the cause hits close to home.

When Henderson was 2 years old, doctors found a tumor growing on her left cheekbone. She was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, an aggressive soft-tissue carcinoma. Rhabdomyosarcoma accounts for only 5 percent of all pediatric cancers in the United States. Fortunately, after two years of treatment, Henderson was—and remains—cancer free.

Cancer blindsided Henderson’s family in 2012 when her oldest aunt was diagnosed with breast cancer. Henderson’s mom was diagnosed a year later, and her youngest aunt was diagnosed in the spring of 2017. Henderson’s mother and oldest aunt have since fully recovered.

It was never easy for Henderson to verbalize her experiences with cancer. Now that she’s a young adult, however, she’s finding her voice.

“I always had like this, something inside me telling me that people should know or do something about [childhood cancer],” Henderson says. “It’s always been my passion to give back.”

Henderson hopes to become a pediatric oncologist.

“My story’s not finished,” Henderson says. “I’m not done with this fight yet.”

—by Hannah Schneider

—Photography by Theo Schwarz

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