

Rylee Dorer will stand in front of about 1,000 teenagers from across the country this week to tell her story, and she doesn't want the sadness of it to overwhelm her real message: hope.

She is an athlete at Red Lion Area High School, an honor roll student, a student council representative, and a cancer survivor.

The cancer was her struggle, but it's not what defines her. Living is.

"I had a chance of dying, but I didn't. But we're going to focus on the 'I didn't,'" said the 17-year-old. "The point is: I'm OK."

She's OK, she said, because of an army of young people, 20somethings who didn't know her and many who would never meet her. She believes they saved her life.



Enjoying a bit of the sweet life are, from left, Dalaney, Rylee, Shannon and Amy Dorer. (Photo: Submitted)

A scary diagnosis

Her battle started when she was having difficulty breathing, especially while playing soccer. A trip to the pediatrician led to a theory that she had pneumonia and needed antibiotics, said her father, Shannon Dorer of Windsor.

When the antibiotics didn't work, X-rays showed she had a mass in her chest, pressing on her heart and esophagus. The diagnosis: stage 4 non-Hodgkin T-cell lymphoma. Rylee was just 6 years old.

Dorer and Rylee's mother, Amanda Pross of Delta, couldn't explain to her what was happening because she was so young. "We told her she was sick and would have to stay (in the hospital) a little while," Dorer said.

She spent two years in and out of Penn State Hershey Children's Hospital - 100 to 120 days, her father estimated, first with surgery to remove the mass, then radiation followed by chemotherapy.

"They give you this protocol – this treatment plan for two years," Dorer said. "We just tried to take it day by day."

When she was 8, her final port – a device that draws blood and delivers medicine – was removed from her chest. She felt she had crossed a threshold with that surgery. It marked the end of treatment, the end of cancer, the last vestige of an illness that had taken part of her childhood but that she barely understood.

"For all of us, it was kind of a moment, an occasion. It was the last thing taken out of her body," her father said. They celebrated that ending with friends and family. She has been cancer free since.



The cancer journey kept Rylee Dorer (far right) apart from her family at times. From left are her mom, Amanda Pross, and brother and sister, Corbin and Dalaney Dorer. (Photo: Submitted)

Her new mission

In those two years of hospital stays, college students had visited her hospital room and sat by her side. They checked in on her and cheered her victories.

"The doctors and nurses have as much of an impact as these college kids do helping kids they don't even know," Rylee said in a recent interview. "It's absolutely incredible."

They were Penn State students, ambassadors for [Thon](#), the school's dance marathon, the largest student philanthropy in the nation. It donates millions of dollars each year to the [Four Diamonds Fund](#), an organization tied into Penn State University and the Hershey Medical Center. Many former Thon students remain committed to the Four Diamonds' cause years after graduating.

Rylee was serenaded by a music therapist and did some art therapy as well, funded by Four Diamonds. In fact, Four Diamonds paid the bills or portions of bills that insurance didn't pay for the two years that Rylee underwent treatment, Shannon Dorer said.

Rylee doesn't take all of that for granted.

"My choice is to be the mouthpiece for all the people who don't want to talk or can't because they're sick or because they died because there hasn't been enough research," she said.



Rylee Dorer (far right) battled cancer as a child, and she has been in remission for 11 years. She talks with great hope and courage, part of which she credits to her family. From left, Jade Dorer, Corbin Dorer, Groot (the dog), Dalaney Dorer, Rylee, Bella and Bowser. (Photo: Submitted)

She'll take that message to McDonald, Pa., near Pittsburgh, next week, where she will speak at the [National Student Council Conference](#) about how Thon, Mini-Thon and Four Diamonds changed her life. She hopes the student council representatives will see, as she does, that this fundraiser can save more lives, she said.

Red Lion Area High School participates in the [Mini-Thon, a high school \(sometimes even elementary school\) replica of fundraising done at the Penn State Thon](#).

"Students are very creative about how they raise dollars," said Kristen Masengarb, director of Mini-Thon for Four Diamonds.



Thon is the biggest student philanthropy in the nation, built on a 46-hour dance marathon at Penn State. Four Diamonds children are taken into the Bryce Jordan Center to inspire the dancers, who raise money for Thon throughout the school year. (Photo: Abby Drey - Centre Daily Times via AP)

The Four Diamonds Fund

In the 2017-18 school year, Mini-Thon participants - teenagers and younger - from Pennsylvania and four other states raised \$7 million of the \$18.3 million donated to Four Diamonds that year.

"Over the last 50 years, the survival rate for childhood cancer has increased significantly," said Kelly Walker, communications manager at Four Diamonds. "Our goal is to save every child, so we will continue to raise money until that is the reality."

Beyond visits with her hematologist at Hershey, Dr. Andrew Freiberg, Rylee visits Hershey once a year - now as a survivor - to visit a team that watches her progress and monitors her health. She'll be on that survivorship team for the rest of her life.



Since Thon started at Penn State in 1977, it has raised nearly \$168 million for the Four Diamonds Fund.

"I have made lifelong friends of people who had treatments the same time as me," Rylee said. She has a message for all those students, all those therapists, all the people who lifted her spirits when she was just a kid: "You saved me."

Many people don't share their stories of weeks and months in the hospital and the care they got through Thon and Four Diamonds, she said. "And I understand why people don't talk about it because it's hard. It's sad. ... But no one is ever going to pay attention unless you talk about it."

Talking about it, she hopes, will spur action. More Mini-Thons, more research, more children saved. It inspires hope.