An Angel Among Us
Ashley Crouse remembered for Dance Marathon, love of life

by Gavin Lesnick
Indiana Daily Student

Published Tuesday, April 11, 2006

One year ago today Mary Beth Crouse made two phone calls that she will never forget.

The first occurred during the day after Mary Beth's home computer brought up an error in Microsoft Word. The second came after 11:30 p.m. when a sorority sister at Kappa Kappa Gamma -- her daughter Ashley's sorority -- called and gave Mary Beth a phone number at the hospital.

Something had happened to Ashley.

Mary Beth hung up and dialed immediately. You need to come now, they told her.

Moments later, Mary Beth, her husband Kim and their two sons piled into the car. Seventy miles from Bloomington, the family departed from its Carmel home scared and in search of Ashley.

Some time past midnight, the family members found themselves face-to-face with a physician inside Bloomington Hospital. Ashley had been thrown from the rear passenger seat of her boyfriend's car after another vehicle hit it just in front of her sorority house at IU. She had sustained severe injuries, the doctor told them.

She had not survived.

"Your world just crumbles," Mary Beth said. "We were all absolutely devastated. We were crushed. She was our only daughter. It's their only sister. And she was gone."

The terrible news spread quickly among the many friends and supporters who crowded the emergency room that night. By the next afternoon -- after an exhausted Crouse family had returned home to Carmel -- more than a thousand students marched from the top of Jordan Avenue to Kappa Kappa Gamma on Third Street in remembrance of Ashley. Friends and strangers alike embraced each other, remembering the person who dedicated herself passionately to Dance Marathon, loved speaking Spanish, dutifully prepared for law school and lived each day fully believing and sharing Walt Disney's famed mantra, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

Ashley was gone. She would not be forgotten.

AT HOME IN CARMEL

Ashley's room in Carmel is mostly empty now. It's up the stairs and through a door just past the framed high school senior portrait of Ashley hung between those of her two brothers. Scattered cards from well-wishers overflow upon the carpet and beside those are a pair of albums filled with hundreds of letters from Ashley's friends. A collage of photos her Kappa Kappa Gamma sisters made stands against the wall.

On the shelf in the corner, there are a few of Ashley's possessions: a plaque she received at the 2004
Dance Marathon, a letter encased in an empty glass Orange Crush bottle, Kappa Kappa Gamma candles and a "Beauty and the Beast" music box her mother gave her. Mary Beth winds it and the soft melody quietly fills the room as the characters dance beneath its glass dome.

Even before moving into this house a few years ago, the Crouse family lived just a few miles down the street. Ashley was born here, and this is the place she called home.

Ashley stayed busy growing up, developing an energy that would stick with her even through her IU years. She was involved in soccer, 4-H, ice skating, basketball, gymnastics, camping and cheerleading, among others.

One of Mary Beth's favorite stories came while Ashley was in high school. Ashley had given up cheerleading for soccer, her favorite. She was good, too, and by her junior year, Ashley made the varsity team in a school system replete with top talent. When she found out her two closest friends had been cut, though, Ashley met with the coach and decided to resign, leaving behind the accomplishment.

"We were like, 'You made the soccer team -- here in Carmel -- and you're not going to play?''" Mary Beth said. "And she was like, 'No, I'm not going to play.'"

Mary Beth shuffles through the many cards on the floor and finds one from the mother of one of those soccer friends. It says that Ashley's decision warmed her heart as she showed that "friendship and being together is more important than competition and status."

And maybe it was for the best. That gave Ashley more time for other endeavors in her busy schedule, like the Care to Share program where she adopted a needy family at Christmas and worked through the holiday season to raise money for presents. She also began running in the Indianapolis 500 mini-marathon in high school, a race she would finish five years in a row. Her senior year, she was named homecoming queen and chosen as student body president after a run-off election.

That put Ashley in office with Ashley Aletto, one of her best friends since middle school. Together, the two campaigned as "Ashley Squared" and were surprised and thrilled to find out they would lead the student government together. In addition to planning normal extracurricular activities, the two Ashleys organized philanthropies like the Care to Share program or a fundraiser for an ill classmate. After Sept. 11, they collected donations and created a reflection room for distressed students.

"I don't remember a time she wasn't trying to help or do something for someone or make someone laugh. That's who she was," Aletto said. "It was probably a kind of high for her when she saw the faces of other people she was helping. I never knew her any other way."

**LEAVING FOR COLLEGE**

It takes precisely seven minutes to get from Aletto's home to the Crouse residence. Aletto knows because the two made the trip so often that they eventually got the timing down.

But when it came time for college, the distance grew much greater. Aletto stayed close to home at Butler, but Ashley took off for Clemson University in South Carolina - she wanted to get away. Ashley had zero interest in going to IU, her mother said.

When Aletto tearfully bid high school goodbye in an emotional graduation speech, it was Ashley who helped her through it, sitting behind her friend and offering support.
"She would tell me everything will be fine, whatever happens," Aletto said. "She always was the adventurous one."

But by November of her freshman year, that adventurous spirit might have worn down just a little. Ashley called Mary Beth that month and told her she wanted to transfer to IU -- where her older brother Charlie was a junior, a Little 500 rider and a member of Phi Gamma Delta.

Ashley fit in immediately, Charlie said, and didn't even need his help as she adjusted. She had already begun the process of becoming a Kappa while at Clemson, so she joined IU's pledge class upon arrival.

"She made lots of friends forever there," Mary Beth said. "She just loved the Kappa house. It's the girls, it's the friendships, the sisterhood and the bond you have with those girls."

With Ashley situated and happy in her new surroundings, Charlie no longer needed to be the big brother who looked out for his little sister. Instead, for the year-and-a-half they both went to IU, he and Ashley became friends.

"I did get a lot closer with my sister at IU," he said. "I was fortunate that probably my closest years with my sister were her last when we were in Bloomington at the same time."

And perhaps it was that closeness that helped introduce Ashley to what would become one of the biggest parts of her life: Dance Marathon. Charlie had been active in the 36-hour fundraiser that raises money for children at Riley Hospital in Indianapolis, and by the time he got his sister involved as a freshman, she was hooked.

"She really excelled at making people feel good about themselves," Charlie said. "Dance Marathon was kind of a catalyst to take it to the next level. After she did her initial Dance Marathon, it became apparent immediately that it was going to be her main job in college."

**DANCE MARATHON**

There is a tradition at the end of Dance Marathon that the song "Angels Among Us" by Alabama comes on the loud speaker. Every time -- even at regional marathons she would attend throughout the state and country -- Ashley was the first one to tear up.

"We were all like 'Why are you crying?"' said senior Hilary Hodes, who first met Ashley when they worked on the event together as sophomores. "And she said, 'They're tears of joy.'"

Ashley became so involved so quickly that after her first marathon, she jumped directly to the position of vice president internal. That meant a huge role in planning, organizing and running the event. But Ashley embraced the challenge.

"She just lived and breathed Dance Marathon," said Jenny Heimerl, one of Ashley's friends and former roommates at Kappa. "She had such a passion for it."

It also gave Ashley the opportunity to travel to other marathons, including lengthy road trips to places like Iowa and Penn State. Hodes remembers with fondness and laughter the late-night conversations that included tales of Ashley's childhood cat Miss Kitty, the time she mistook the moon for a giant peach or once when, out of the blue, she proudly declared, "My dad: love of my life."

But even though Ashley enjoyed the people she worked with, the road trips and the year-long planning...
and development of the event, everyone agrees the Riley children drove her.

"No one is as selfless as Ashley," Hodes said. "And no one has such a passion for life. And she really
got to put the two of those together in Dance Marathon."

Marissa Lutz, a 2005 IU graduate, met Ashley when they served on the event's 2004 executive council. She remembers how Ashley had a special way of relating with the children.

"She just looked at them as people and not kids with problems," Lutz said. "(In Dance Marathon,) you
would see the things you stress about aren't important at all. These kids are undergoing brain surgery,
heart surgery and all these horrible treatments. And they're still so positive; they love life. That's what
Ashley shared with them."

FALLING IN LOVE

Chris Carlson inherited his job as a waiter at Kappa Kappa Gamma when his graduating predecessor
recognized Carlson's interest in a certain member of the house.

"He was like -- and he knew I'd been talking to a Kappa -- 'Hey, you can take my job. It's a great job and
even if things don't work out with her, there's a hundred other girls there,'" Carlson said.

But things did work out between Carlson and Ashley. The two met as freshmen and Sept. 25, 2003 --
Carlson knows the date like the back of his hand -- one of Ashley's roommates delivered a dance
invitation in the form of an Orange Crush bottle to his room on her behalf. It wasn't long before they
were boyfriend and girlfriend.

With Carlson a biology major and Ashley pre-law and both of them heavily involved in their greek
houses as well as Dance Marathon, neither had much time to spare. But Carlson remembers carving out
space each day for walks across campus, conversations in the Kappa cafeteria or study sessions in the
Union. Sometimes, Carlson would stretch the sorority's midnight guest curfew just a little, but someone
was always willing to look the other way.

On his first Christmas visit to the Crouse home in Carmel, Carlson stayed in the guest bedroom -- which
coincidentally placed him right beside Ashley's parents' bedroom. When Ashley checked on him the first
night, he admitted it was strange to be alone after growing up sharing a room and then always having
roommates at IU. Ashley climbed in bed next to him, so a nervous Carlson got up, put on his jeans and a
sweatshirt and returned to lie down atop the covers.

"I ended up staying awake probably three or four hours while she fell asleep right here on me," Carlson
said, pointing to the crux of his shoulder. "Every sound I heard I thought was her dad coming down the
hallway. I was glad that she cared so much to do that, but I was terrified of what her family might have
thought."

Ashley and Carlson grew closer as they went to formals, worked on Dance Marathon and contemplated
a future together. Carlson gave the Orange Crush bottle back to Ashley with a note inside. It eventually
ended up back in Carmel, displayed proudly atop the shelf in Ashley's room.

Carlson became president of the 2005 marathon while Ashley ran unsuccessfully for IU Student
Association treasurer on the Kirkwood ticket. But she stayed involved with the marathon too, working
as the vice president of communication under Carlson's presidency. She would not, however, live to take
part in the event itself.
To this day, Carlson has kept all of the notes, cards and letters Ashley sent him. He smiles thinking back on the daily text message he'd get from Ashley. Beside his bed, he keeps a bucket of seashells she once collected for him during spring break. And he still keeps his job at Kappa as a waiter.

"It's always tough for like a split second when a short, blonde-haired girl is going through the food line," Carlson said. "That's just something I got to see for maybe two years. And for just maybe that split second, I almost forget and think it might be her."

**SAYING GOODBYE**

The Dance Marathon meeting ended late at night April 11, 2005, and Carlson was going to give Ashley and another student a ride home. Typically, Carlson said he and Ashley kept their business and personal lives so separate that people they'd worked with for weeks would be surprised to learn they were dating. But that night, he and Ashley left the Union holding hands as they walked to his car.

The two planned to go to a friends' 21st birthday party and arrived at his car together. Carlson was going to drop Ashley off and was trying to convince her to be ready in 20 minutes as they drove through the Ballantine parking garage, past the stop sign by Jordan Hall and toward the intersection of Third and Hawthorne.

He was pulling through the blinking red lights when a car heading west on Third slammed into Carlson's. Ashley was not wearing a seatbelt and was ejected violently from the vehicle. As the only one in the car not to lose consciousness on impact, Carlson is charged with keeping a complete timeline of that horrific event forever trapped in his mind. When he thinks of that night -- and he often does -- he likes to remember how he and Ashley had been holding hands on what became their final walk through campus.

"I try and think about that part of it," Carlson said. "And not the parts that are so loud and vivid in my mind."

In the hospital, Carlson had to be sedated when he found out Ashley had died. Then, he saw the Crouses.

"They immediately came up and embraced me," Carlson said. "Her brothers did, her family, as inconsolable as they were, they still came to me. That's something I'll never be able to repay them for."

Just a week after the accident, six days after the greek community marched down Jordan Avenue in Ashley's honor and four days after she was laid to rest beneath a head stone reading "An Angel Among Us," Carlson was at the next Dance Marathon meeting. It was what Ashley would have wanted, he said.

As the council members filed into their usual seats, Carlson began the meeting with one empty seat by his side. Everyone shed tears that night, but they also devised a plan to hold the next Dance Marathon in Ashley's honor.

"That got me back to a functional level," Carlson said. "I felt like I was still working with her, for her. It made her a part of my everyday life, which I knew was going to be so hard not to have."

The Crouse family attended the Dance Marathon in October and saw a HPER building decorated equally with banners reading "For the Kids" and "ALC" for Ashley Louise Crouse. They saw the gym filled with dancers and volunteers, some of them shedding tears, others sharing stories and all of them working to honor Ashley.
"Her legacies are incredible," Mary Beth said. "We had no idea the impact Ashley had on people. It's been humbling."

When the amount raised was announced, the proceeds totaled $677,415.19. That was $200,000 more than 2004 and more than a quarter of a million greater than in 2003.

Somewhere, somehow Ashley was smiling. Or maybe shedding more tears of joy when "Angels Among Us" came on one more time.

"It was such an amazing marathon," Hodes said. "The only thing that would have made it better was sharing it with Ashley."

Lutz still hasn't taken Ashley's number out of her cell phone and doesn't know if she'll ever be able to. But she said she was comforted and amazed by the support from the community at Dance Marathon and everywhere.

"It just goes to show how unbelievably amazing of an influence she was," she said. "Out of all the students at IU, to think that one person did that. One person ... She'll always be remembered during every year's marathon. You find solace in that."

**THE FIRST PHONE CALL**

One year ago today, Ashley was a junior at IU with dreams of going to law school in Indianapolis. Maybe Carlson would go to medical school at IU-Purdue University Indianapolis and work in her father's business, with him and her brother Charlie -- all of her favorite people in the world together beneath the same roof. Maybe she and Carlson would live together. Maybe one day they'd be married.

A year ago today, Ashley knew she had a summer internship with the Riley Foundation -- the group she'd worked so hard to raise money for through Dance Marathon. Aletto remembers talking on the phone with Ashley days earlier and finding her friend ecstatic with the news.

It was a year ago today that Ashley's mother Mary Beth made two phone calls she will never forget. The second was a late-night call to the hospital that ultimately led her to learning her daughter's terrible fate.

The first might not have seemed like anything special at the time. After all, Mary Beth spoke with Ashley every day. The computer in the living room had stalled in Microsoft Word and Mary Beth needed some help. She dialed her daughter.

Mary Beth might not remember how long they talked or the exact details of everything said. But she does remember one thing.

"(It was) the last thing she said to me -- and this was not atypical of our phone conversations -- but the last thing she said to me was 'I love you mom."' Mary Beth said. "'I love you Ashley. 'I love you too Mom.'"

"An Angel Among Us"

© 2006 Indiana Daily Student