

Ferguson Brings Comfort to Cancer Patients

After Matt Ferguson, **NORTHERN ARIZONA 2016**, saw women undergo chemotherapy treatments with little support at their side, he provided them blankets and other necessities, launching a nonprofit.

By Tom Malone, **OREGON 2012**

The spring recipient of the Mark V. Anderson Character-in-Action™ Leadership Award, Matt Ferguson, **NORTHERN ARIZONA 2016**, started his nonprofit organization, Matt's Chemo Bags, after his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008. At his mother's chemotherapy treatment center in Portland, Ore., Ferguson noticed women who were alone and had little support during chemotherapy. As a 14-year-old student at Liberty High School (LHS) in Hillsboro, Ore., he wanted to help, so he performed a small act of kindness that would eventually grow into a nonprofit organization.

"That Christmas [of 2008], my mom received a bag from my aunt with a blanket and a pillow [inside]. I noticed that after she got the bag, she took it everywhere she went," Ferguson says, noting that his mother had it with her during each of her treatments. "I thought it was really amazing that a single item could bring the feeling of home to my mom."

Inspired to help others in the same way, Ferguson worked with oncology nurses to select 15 key items that women in chemotherapy treatment needed, including blankets, scarves and lotion. He placed the items in what he called "chemo bags" and distributed them to those receiving treatment in

his mother's oncology center. Ferguson received positive feedback from patients and nurses for his actions, followed by calls from inspired volunteers who eventually donated items and time to his cause.

Two years later, the reach of Matt's Chemo Bags had grown, as Ferguson donated about 45 bags per month to 10 clinics throughout Oregon. Part of the help that enabled his efforts came from those at his alma mater, LHS, for which he was student body vice president in 2010.

"[Matt] was very influential in our school and had a lot of respect within our community," says Nicole Thompson, activities director at LHS, explaining the desire to assist with his work. "We connected with statewide organizations and started 'Think Pink Week' [in 2010] to raise funds to make more bags."

During his senior year of high school, Ferguson organized an event with the Oregon Association of Student Councils in which student leaders from across the state stuffed items into 800 chemo bags in 45 minutes. This became an annual tradition.

Ferguson eventually achieved nonprofit status with Matt's Chemo Bags, and outside interest in the organization grew. With financial contributions and volunteer power from corporations such as Nike,

Character-in-Action



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A person with good character shows trustworthiness, respect and fairness to others, as well as responsibility and citizenship. Those members who go out of their way to help others and those who overcome obstacles and lead with integrity are good candidates for the Mark V. Anderson Character-in-Action™ Leadership Award.

Sigma Chi has introduced the award to recognize the selfless acts of brothers. The Fraternity is known for building leaders, and its members have a reputation of acting with character to change their communities. A formal recognition of these actions by the Fraternity allows non-members to appreciate the scope of the organization.

For more information about the award criteria, visit sigmachicago.org/mark-v-anderson-character-in-action-leadership-award. Email character@sigmachicago.org to nominate a brother.

Nestlé, and Intel Corp., and a \$2,000 mini-grant from the Susan G. Komen Foundation, Ferguson propelled Matt's Chemo Bags even further.

After only five years, Ferguson had taken a simple act and turned it into an organization that has distributed a total of about 9,000 bags to more than 90 oncology clinics in Oregon, Washington, California, Arizona and Utah. In the latter state, Ferguson's organization delivers the bags to the Huntsman Cancer Institute (HCI), the General Fraternity's preferred philanthropy.

Words of gratitude

Ferguson has received public recognition for his efforts. Breast Friends, a nonprofit headquartered in Oregon that teaches friends and family specific ways to show support for loved ones with cancer, presented Ferguson its 2010 Compassion Award. Fellow award winners have included practicing doctors and nurses, according to breastfriends.org. Ferguson also earned Nickelodeon's 2012 TeenNick HALO Award, which recognizes teens from across the country who make personal sacrifices to help others.

"I didn't think [Matt's Chemo Bags] would go this far when I was just 14, trying to do some good for a few people," says Ferguson. "I was raised to believe that giving back was just another part of life."

The ideals that he learned through his upbringing have allowed him to affect many people. He receives weekly letters from women in chemotherapy who thank him for his simple, yet impactful gestures of care. Through letters, some breast cancer patients say that after they received blankets, they smiled for the first time since their diagnosis.

"People really open up their hearts in these letters," Ferguson says. "It makes me believe that I'm doing the right thing."

Moving forward

Since Ferguson's Initiation into Sigma Chi, he has worked with members of Northern Arizona University's Greek-letter community to enhance the reach of his organization. He and his Fraternity brothers host community service events with sororities and women's fraternities during which participants create blankets and scarves that fill the donation bags.

"We're seeing where our money, time and effort go and we see that right away," says Derby Days Chairman Dakota Chavez, **NORTHERN ARIZONA 2015**. "We see the impact this makes and it's powerful."

This year, the chapter's Derby Days philanthropic event will increase awareness of Ferguson's organization as students make chemo bags and raise money for the nonprofit. According to him and Chavez, the chapter will give an estimated 25 percent of the total money raised through Derby Days to Matt's Chemo Bags, and will donate a larger portion of the funds to HCI.

While Ferguson is now making an impact on his brothers and their Greek-letter community, he also left a mark on LHS activities director Thompson. According to her, high school students still see Ferguson as a role model and some have started charities in the wake of his actions. Thompson also continues to organize events for Matt's Chemo Bags.

"Watching Matt and seeing him grow has taught me more than anything I could have taught him," Thompson says, adding that he has showed her to expect greatness and to celebrate it.

Above left: Members of the Oregon Association of Student Councils recently gather items to stuff into bags that will be delivered to women in oncology clinics across Oregon. The bags are courtesy of Matt's Chemo Bags, a nonprofit organization created by Matt Ferguson, **NORTHERN ARIZONA 2016**.