

The true value of a dollar

Student needs funds for a double-lung transplant

As college graduates take the next step in their lives, their debts may seem overwhelming, but for students who battle chronic illnesses, their educational expenses plus medical bills can be insurmountable.

Ashley Guthrie, agricultural economics junior, knows this story all too well. Guthrie has battled cystic fibrosis for the past 22 years, and a double-lung transplant is her best chance at a normal, disease-free life.

"Since I have had it my whole life, I really have never known any other way," Guthrie said. "It's just part of me."

Cystic fibrosis is a genetic mutation that stops the production of protein in the cells of

the lungs, which causes abnormally thick, sticky mucus that clogs the lungs and leads to life-threatening lung infections, according to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation.

The disease has been a nuisance throughout most of Guthrie's life, and it will eventually cause so much mucus to build up in her lungs they will no longer be functional.

Guthrie has been on the donor waiting list since November 2002. The two-year wait is more than half over, and Guthrie said she expects to receive a double-lung transplant in November 2004.

Due to the \$150,000 price tag on this life-extending procedure, the Oklahoma

State University Student Government Association has declared the Ashley Guthrie Project its primary fund-raising effort for the year.

"We felt since we are the representing body of OSU and we have the capacity to take on a project of this mass, it would be easier for us to raise the money than a smaller organization," said Joe St. John, SGA vice president. "We're willing to do what we can."

The SGA has pledged to continue creating fund-raising events until it has raised the money needed for the transplant.

The SGA became involved in Guthrie's campaign when her cousin and campaign coordinator, Janna Westmoreland-Morgan, called OSU organizations to see if they wanted to help out, said Guthrie.

Since the beginning of the fall 2003 semester, SGA has encouraged other organizations to join in its effort to help Guthrie with her medical needs.

Businesses, individuals and organizations have rallied behind the Ashley Guthrie Project to donate time, energy and, most importantly, money.

After the OSU Homecoming Parade, the SGA, Stillwater's International House of Pancakes restaurant, and Kinnunen Sales and Rentals sponsored a rooftop fund-raiser, hoping to raise \$10,000.

Stillwater Radio disc jockeys Dave Deken of KSPI-FM and Gil Stuart of KGFY-FM camped and broadcast from the IHOP roof, promising not to come down until the full amount was raised.

Activities for children were available in the IHOP parking lot. A fish tank at the IHOP entrance collected donations from pocket change to \$1,000 donations, all equally accepted and appreciated.

Adam Stringer, IHOP general manager, said before he had heard of the Ashley Guthrie Project he knew nothing about Guthrie as a person, but now he knows a lot.

"She came here numerous nights and actually sat on the roof, and you could tell she wasn't feeling well," said Stringer. "But she wanted to be here because she wanted to be part of it."

Stringer said Guthrie was calm even though so many people were helping her.

"When she saw people give money, she thanked them," he said.



Standing atop Stillwater's International House of Pancakes, Ashley Guthrie (right) joins one of her many supporters, Gil Stuart, Stillwater Radio KGFY-FM disc jockey. Stuart continued his daily broadcast and lived on the roof for four days before \$10,000 was raised to help fund Guthrie's double-lung transplant. (Photos by Jeremy Porter)

Although Stringer decided to participate in the Ashley Guthrie Project only a week before the fund-raiser began, he had been searching for a way to give back to the community for seven months. When the SGA approached him with the idea of supporting Guthrie, he was immediately interested.

"It became a personal thing," said Stringer. "It was for more than just an organization. We were doing a fund-raiser for Ashley, who came here many times before, and we knew she needed the money to save her life."

David Webb, Stillwater radio manager said Deken and Stuart came down from the roof after four days because they knew they had raised the \$10,000, and Stillwater radio representatives were working hard to collect the money and deposit it in the account.

Though \$10,000 has been raised, many more dollars are needed, and the SGA continues to organize fund-raising events.

Nikki Ebert, SGA vice president's chief of staff and Ashley Guthrie Project committee head, said she and the other three committee members are planning additional fund-raising events for spring 2004. Though solid plans have not yet been made, the group would like the next event to be closer to campus to involve students and OSU affiliates while also allowing Stillwater citizens to participate.

"I think it's wonderful that everybody is willing to help and try to do something to make Ashley's lung transplant possible," said Janie Williams, Guthrie's mom. "When you're young it can be hard to let other people know that you have a serious disease; sometimes they just back away, mostly because they're scared. But it's great for her to have all this support and backing."

Born in Wyoming, Guthrie lived in Wisconsin for a short time, but most of her life was spent in the small town of Haskell, Okla. Although doctors told her parents she wouldn't live to be a year old, she survived an active childhood, playing softball from time to time, cheerleading from sixth grade through her senior year, and serving as class president and student senate president.

"Ashley never dwelled on her disease," said Williams. "The doctors said she wouldn't be able to do a lot in school but everything that came along, she did. For her, this is just a way of life."

Guthrie graduated from Haskell High School in 1999 with a class of 40 and started her college career at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in fall 2000.

During her two years at NEO, Guthrie took a variety of classes, which helped her decide to major in agricultural economics.

Guthrie has attended OSU for a year, and keeping up with school has become more difficult since she has been sick more frequently.

"I used to only go to the hospital once every six months, but I've been getting sick more often," said Guthrie.

Williams said her daughter was well throughout most of junior high and then in the hospital a lot during high school. During her first year of college she wasn't as sick, but this last year she has been in the hospital about every month.

"The doctor said she is in the end stage of cystic fibrosis," Williams said. "She's gotten to the point where there's not a lot of medicine or things they can do. They just try to keep her stable so she can get a transplant."

When Guthrie's name reaches the top of the list, she will need the \$150,000 to pay for the transplant, and she will also have to meet certain weight and health requirements before undergoing the risky procedure.

The risky part of the transplant is not the surgery, but the possibility that Guthrie's body will reject the new lungs at any time from a month to years after she begins breathing with them, said Williams. She will need to continue taking medicine to prevent rejection for several years after the transplant is completed, making the initial \$150,000 pale in comparison to the price of long-term medical needs.

The fund raising for Guthrie's transplant is being arranged through the Children's Organ Transplant Association.

Guthrie said not a lot of people use COTA, but she and her family decided it was a good way to keep people from doubting whether the money they raised was being used for a legitimate cause.

"This way all the money goes directly into an account that COTA has set up, and they give it to us as we need it," said Guthrie.

As Guthrie's family waits and hopes for funds, they know there is the possibility that their oldest sister and daughter may be too sick to receive the transplant when the time comes. However, also knowing that cystic fibrosis is one of the hardest diseases a family can face due to its unpredictable nature, the family said raising awareness is a secondary goal that may help others find a cure.

"We want to continue helping the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, although it doesn't



Gil Stuart interviews Steve Rice, lead vocalist and guitarist of the red-dirt band No Justice, about funds contributed to the Ashley Guthrie Project from the band's November concert in Stillwater.

help anyone directly and all their money goes to research," said Williams. "I have two sons, two other daughters, nieces and nephews, and all of them could carry the cystic fibrosis gene."

Though Guthrie's sisters and two half-brothers have never been tested for cystic fibrosis, they have never shown symptoms. But, because cystic fibrosis occurs through gene transfer, any offspring of this generation will be susceptible to the disease.

For the Guthrie family, their need for money is a stark reality. When they first found out what the cost of the transplant would be, they thought it would be impossible to raise such a sum with only the support of their small-town community.

Haskell citizens have managed to contribute \$8,000 toward the transplant funds, which brings the total amount donated to only about \$18,000. There is still a daunting \$132,000 left to raise.

Yet, Guthrie and her family value every dollar contributed and maintain high hopes that before November 2004 arrives there will be enough funds to buy the lungs Guthrie needs to complete her college career and begin a new, healthier chapter in her life.

"We've been amazed that outsiders we've never heard of and will probably never meet have helped so much," Williams said. "They have just been so wonderful." ♦ *By Sarah Fultz Prater, Stillwater, Okla.; and Afton Jameson, Geary, Okla.*

To contribute to the Ashley Guthrie Project, call the Student Government Association at (405) 744-6500.