

Courage Through Cancer

An innovative fundraising campaign for supporting students impacted by a frightening disease

At the beginning of her nine-month treatment for invasive breast cancer and metastatic disease, SDSU alumna and 21-year alumni staff member, Tammy Blackburn, decided to open her heart to the goodness cancer would bring. Many cancer patients would suggest that cancer brings no good to anyone or anything and is a frightening disease that tears patients and their families and friends apart. But for Tammy and the SDSU family, not only did her devastating cancer diagnosis bring goodness, it brought hope and promise to students who would face similar challenges while trying to earn their college degrees.

In April 2018, Tammy was five months into her treatment when she suggested that SDSU Alumni consider creating a fund for students who are significantly impacted by a cancer diagnosis. The fund was aligned with the alumni fundraising mission and would fit nicely with fundraising priorities including crowdfunding and SDSU's annual day of giving. With buy-in from the Assistant Vice President, a ringing endorsement by the Alumni Board of Advisors, and a few conversations with donors, the alumni office approved the fundraising initiative. By August 2018, a fundraising campaign plan was in place to carry out an unprecedented, innovative campaign to solicit alumni to donate to The Wallace, Shatsky, Blackburn, Courage Through Cancer Fund, a fund named for Tammy and the two doctors who saved her life.

Background: In June and July 2018, the alumni office met with campus partners including academic affairs and the Emergency Crisis Response Team (ECRT) to iron out the application process for students and establish award parameters. Additionally, donor feedback provided valuable insight to the alumni staff regarding student impact stories and matching challenge gifts. Finally, university officials were asked to share the impact story of a particular student in need through multiple communication vehicles that would be disseminated to alumni nationwide. These conversations resulted in identifying a two-month solicitation plan bringing SDSU's annual day of giving together with October's Breast Cancer Awareness month to maximize exposure and demonstrate the immediate need.

Goal: The goal was to raise \$75,000 in two months using an innovative approach through matching gifts, an online give day and a nationally recognized cancer awareness platform. Additionally, funds would be distributed immediately based on need. But the timing of sequential solicitations and matching gifts had to be carefully strung together to optimize giving platforms and awareness that would support this initiative.

#1: As the Office of SDSU Alumni developed the fundraising platforms, a \$25,000 matching gift would need to be in place in order to raise \$50,000 for the endowment.

#2: In addition to the \$50,000 raised, \$25,000 in incremental funding was needed to award students who were already applying for emergency funds.

#3: At least one student who was applying for the funding needed to agree to have his or her story shared with alumni and friends. An impact story would serve as the catalyst for donors to respond

#4: Digital messaging including videos, social media and emails needed to be distributed strategically, in a timely manner and to the world-wide alumni audience.

Objective: Successfully develop an innovative fundraising campaign to attract donors with a propensity to make an immediate and significant impact on students in danger of interrupting or ending their studies due to financial burdens brought about by cancer.

Timeline:

- April 2018 – Idea of fund and campaign brought up for discussion
- May 2018 – SDSU administration confirmed a need for student funding
- June/July 2018 - Seed donors identified, matching gift donors identified, campus partner meetings, strategic messaging meetings, identification of a student in need, marketing asset creation.
- August 2018 – Fund agreement signed; announcement to doctors that the fund was named for them
- September 25th, 2018 – SDSU’s Day of Giving campaign – cancer fund was an option for giving
- October 1st, 2018 – Kick off October Breast Cancer Awareness month by sharing a video message to alumni providing a fundraising update to include number of students who would be supported.

Target Audience: Once the fundraising plan was developed, the Office of SDSU Alumni would solicit alumni and friends world-wide for donations to support tuition, fees, meal plans, books and school supplies. More than 125,000 alumni would receive electronic communication prior to and on SDSU’s annual day of giving, and offered the chance to have their donation doubled.

Budget: A total of \$2,500 was spent from the operations budget of the SDSU Alumni Office.

- Video production for the announcement regarding the fund - \$450
- Social media design and boosted posts - \$300
- Hosted lunches to solicit seed donors to provide matching gift - \$150
- Event for donors announcing the fund - \$1,600

Staffing: Two SDSU Alumni full-time staff dedicated 10 hours per week for three months. Additionally, the SDSU alumni social media manager spent 6 hours per week for two months.

Goal Achieved: September 25, 2018 marked SDSU’s day of giving. In 24 hours, the Wallace, Shatsky, Blackburn, Courage Through Cancer Fund raised **\$74,660**. From October 1 – October 28, 2018, the SDSU Alumni breast cancer awareness solicitation raised **\$17,010**. **A total of \$91,670 was raised from September 25 – October 28.**

Impact: The Wallace, Shatsky, Blackburn, Courage Through Cancer Fund was endowed in one day; \$55,000 is secured in perpetuity while the balance is being awarded to students who are significantly impacted.

- A kinesiology student whose single mom has stage four cancer was awarded, tuition, books and a meal plan.
- A senior in SDSU’s honors college and criminal justice major diagnosed with cancer was awarded tuition and food support.
- A junior from the College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts whose father has a stage four diagnosis, was provided gift cards for food and a \$500 award for incidentals.
- Two additional students as of October 25 had applied for funding, one with a personal cancer diagnosis and another whose father (and primary means of financial support) is currently in hospice. The fund is scheduled to award each of these students the week of October 29th.

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Tammy Blackburn (left) announcing a women's basketball game for Pac-12 Networks. (Credit: Pac-12 Networks)

Wednesday, October 03, 2018

Heart of a Champion

Tammy Blackburn is director of Development Technology for SDSU Alumni, a double alumna ('94, '01) and a long-time donor to SDSU.

By [Coleen L. Geraghty](#)

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“Everything I saw in Tammy as a player was there in her fight with cancer. She has a tremendous attitude and outlook on life, and I’m so proud of all she’s accomplished as an athlete and a person.”

This story appears in the fall 2018 issue of 360: The Magazine of San Diego State University.

The adult heart is roughly the size of a fist, weighs about 11 ounces and pulses at 60-100 beats per minute. That’s the average heart, but certain human hearts are different. **Tammy Blackburn’s** is stronger than most and more resilient. She has the heart of a champion athlete and a cancer survivor.

Blackburn’s long and arduous battle with cancer lasted nearly a year. After the initial shock of the diagnosis, she asked—as most people do—“why me?” The eventual answer was no surprise to anyone who knows Blackburn. “I was meant to do something with this.” Immediately, her thoughts turned to the San Diego State University community.

Blackburn is director of Development Technology for SDSU Alumni, a double alumna ('94, '01) and a long-time donor to SDSU. The university recruited her, and she became a standout guard for the women’s basketball team in the 1990s. Her legendary positive attitude inspired SDSU to create the Tammy Blackburn Award, given annually to the student-athlete who epitomizes loyalty, effort, athletic prowess and team spirit.

As Blackburn underwent treatment, she began to wonder if there was an unmet need among SDSU students affected by cancer. When financial aid administrators confirmed her suspicions, she settled on a name for what she would create—the **Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund**.

Surgeon **Anne Wallace** and oncologist **Rebecca Shatsky** treated Blackburn during chemotherapy, surgery and radiation. “They saved my life,” Blackburn said. “Working on this fund, named for them and directed to SDSU students, has been a giant healing step—psychologically and emotionally.”

A tremendous attitude

The cancer diagnosis was not Blackburn’s first match with adversity. As a basketball star at Brea Olinda High School, she underwent surgery to correct a curvature of the spine. Regaining her confidence was difficult, she said later, but she persevered, and the Wildcats went on to win the California State Championship. **Mark Trakh**, her high school coach, is now head coach of the women’s squad at the University of Southern California (USC).

“Everything I saw in Tammy as a player was there in her fight with cancer,” Trakh said. “She has a tremendous attitude and outlook on life, and I’m so proud of all she’s accomplished as an athlete and a person.”

Blackburn is something of a celebrity in the collegiate basketball world as a sports broadcaster for CBS Sports, ESPN, and the Pac-12 Network. Even after she lost her hair to the chemo, she went on television bald. That kind of courage inspired many Pac-12 teams to honor her during the 2017-18 season. At game after game, Blackburn shifted the focus away from herself and toward affirmation and support for others.

Mark Mays ('69), a cornerstone donor to the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund, recalled Blackburn’s support of his late wife, Karen, during her battle with cancer.

“Tammy is a positive person, a doer,” Mays said. “Like Karen, she is an extraordinary girl put on this earth to...unconsciously spread goodness. How many people do that?”

First recipient

The Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund is already spreading goodness on the SDSU campus. Blackburn worked with **Rose Pasanelli**, director of Financial Aid and Scholarships, to identify the first recipient—sophomore **Cameron McCullough**.

McCullough's mom, his sole support, had been forced to quit her job as a clinical research associate after a stage 4 cancer diagnosis. His part-time work at Home Depot helped, but couldn't cover tuition payments. McCullough thought he would have to leave SDSU.

That was before Blackburn visited him and his mom in August. She told them the new fund would pay his debts from last year plus a portion of his tuition, a meal plan and books for this fall. If McCullough maintains his strong academic performance, he'll continue to be eligible for assistance.

Until now, Blackburn has worked with SDSU to identify three other students who qualify for aid through the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund.

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SDSU Alumni

[Q](#) **MENU**

Courage Through Cancer

New Fund Aids First SDSU Student



Two years ago, Cameron McCullough was as carefree as any high school kid could be, earning decent grades, riding his skateboard, and playing volleyball and basketball. His mom, Schoulee Cones, had a great job as a clinical research associate, which paid their bills and allowed them to plan for a future that would include Cameron's college education.

That was until the nagging ache that made sitting uncomfortable became an excruciating pain that doubled Cones over and repeatedly sent her to doctors for some relief. During an emergency room visit, she finally received an explanation.

"The doctor came in horrified," Cones recalls. "She said, 'You have a gigantic mass and we need to get it biopsied.' That's when I was diagnosed; it was squamous cell carcinoma, metastatic to the bone."

The news was devastating for Cones, a registered nurse who knew exactly what it portended for her and for Cameron, her only child. Her cancer is a difficult type to treat and it wasn't long before it began exacting an overwhelming physical, emotional and financial toll on their close-knit family of two.

"EVERYTHING STARTED CRUMBLING"

Unable to work and battling for her own survival, Cones felt helpless watching her income and savings evaporate. Cameron got a job at Home Depot, but his paychecks weren't nearly enough to cover the bills. "We had to sell his car to pay rent and everything just went quick," Cones says.

She hated the fact that she would no longer be able to provide Cameron the financial foundation for the future they both had imagined for him. "He is my purpose in life – always - for everything," she says. "He's just a great kid."

She tries to stay strong for him; he does the same for her. Together, they managed to get Cameron, who is now 19, through high school and into his first year at SDSU where he studies kinesiology with the goal of becoming a physical therapist.

With help from the university's financial aid office, his freshman year started out smoothly, but then began to unravel, starting with a bad check. "I had never written a bounced check and I didn't know what to do," Cones explains. "Everything started crumbling."

A pay-or-quit notice appeared on their door. With no family to turn to, Cones felt desperate.



SDSU second-year student Cameron McCullough with his mother, Schoulee Cones before her cancer diagnosis

“They didn’t know the situation at SDSU. All they knew was that I wasn’t paying. It was so hard for Cameron to concentrate in school. His meal plan got cut off. I would bring him food and we would sit in the (parking) garage and eat it.

Sharing those simple meals in her car, Cones and her son would encourage each other and try to remain optimistic. A positive person by nature, she has always been truthful with Cameron about their circumstances, maintaining a sanguine disposition even as she wonders how to secure gas and food or come up with the rent money.

Ever present, of course, is her cancer. The thought of it is inescapable for both of them.

A CHAMPION’S FIGHT

A year ago - September 1, 2017, to be exact - SDSU Director of Development Technology Tammy Blackburn ('94, '01) received her own troubling diagnosis. She had breast cancer that had spread to some of her lymph nodes.

Her treatment included chemotherapy followed by surgery and radiation treatments. The regimen, which lasted the better part of a year, was grueling and often agonizing.

Blackburn, a standout guard for the Aztec women’s basketball team in the early '90s, gutted up and approached her ordeal the same way she would take on any tough opponent during her playing days, with extensive preparation, deft execution, and meticulous follow-through. True to form, she beat cancer like the champ that she is.

An SDSU Alumni employee by day, Blackburn moonlights as a sports broadcaster for CBS Sports, ESPN, and the PAC-12 Network. Even after she lost her hair to the chemo, she went on television bald.

Exhausted and in pain from radiation treatments, she would often show up the next day or even the same day at her Parma Payne Goodall Alumni Center office, joking with co-workers that the treatments were no rougher than a practice under Beth Burns, the former women’s basketball coach known for demanding toughness from her players. Well acquainted with the demands of victory, Blackburn beat her cancer like the winner she is.



SDSU Director of Development Technology Tammy Blackburn ('94, '01) in treatment for breast cancer.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

She is also a giver, so it's no surprise that her takeaway from a year of fighting her own cancer was to notice the effect the illness can have on others. While she has reliable employment, an incredible support system, and excellent health care, she encountered many others in vastly different situations.

"Many people have to make decisions on how to spend their limited income," Blackburn says. "Some must choose between paying for food and incidentals for either themselves or their loved ones and paying medical bills to receive life-saving treatment."

Having heard stories on campus about the impact of cancer on the lives of students, Blackburn asked SDSU financial aid administrators if there was an unmet need among students affected by cancer. Their immediate response was yes, absolutely.

At that point I knew what I wanted to do," she says. "I don't want SDSU students forced to make a decision between school and medical bills. I don't want them dropping out."

So she created the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund (<https://securelb.imodules.com/s/997/campaign13/index.aspx?sid=997&gid=1&pgid=7328&cid=15560&bledit=1&dids=605&appealcode=19FEX>) named for the U.C. San Diego Health doctors who saved her life -- surgeon Anne M. Wallace and oncologist Rebecca A. Shatsky. The fund was announced at an August 15 gathering in La Jolla after an initial \$45,000 had been pledged by donors.

THE MOST EXTREME

Through SDSU Financial Aid and Scholarships Director Rose Pasenelli, Blackburn identified Cameron McCullough as the first student her fund would assist. As coordinator for the university's Economic Crisis Response Team (ECRT), Pasenelli, who has worked on campus for 30 years, describes Cameron's case as serious.

"His is the most extreme so far," she says. In addition to the concerns of any freshman, he worried about his mom's failing health along with his own mounting debt.

With no job, his mother could never qualify for a loan. The gap between his financial aid and the cost of his education is thousands of dollars. Cameron felt swamped.



(l-r) Surgeon Anne M. Wallace, Oncologist Rebecca A. Shatsky and Tammy Blackburn at the August 15, 2018 unveiling of the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund.

“My fear was that he was just going to pack and leave,” Pasenelli recalls. “He started shutting down - that was a red flag for us - and that’s why I brought it to the ECRT.”

The team made Cameron’s case a top priority, interceding on his behalf to ensure he had food and housing, but financial aid and student assistance funding have their limitations. Pasenelli views Blackburn’s new fund as filling a critical need.

“Tammy’s fund will help us to help students faster,” she points out. “This fund will help us set students up for success on the front end instead of stressing all the way through the year and trying to scramble and find money wherever we can.”

Having accrued thousands of dollars in debt, Cameron worked full-time all summer at his Home Depot job, unsure how he would pay for his classes this fall. Then, in late August, he received word that some representatives from SDSU Alumni wanted to speak with him and his mom.

NOT JUST A NUMBER

Early in the afternoon of August 21, Cones and Cameron received a visit from Blackburn and Assistant Vice President of SDSU Alumni Dan Montoya ('04). After a lengthy exchange of pleasantries, Blackburn got around to the point of the visit: “Cameron McCullough, you will be the first recipient of the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund.”

What that meant, she explained, was that Cameron’s remaining debt from last year would be paid along with a portion of his tuition, a meal plan and books for the fall semester. Furthermore, additional assistance will be available in the spring if Cameron, who currently maintains a 3.2 GPA, continues his strong scholastic performance.

The relief in the room was palpable. No one’s eyes remained dry.

“I’m lighter already,” Cones said through tears as her son chocked back sobs. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me. Thank you so much.”

“We believe in you,” Blackburn told Cameron. Her affirmation releasing a torrent of emotion as he struggled to express his visibly profound gratitude.



SDSU Financial Aid and Scholarships Director Rose Pasenelli is also the coordinator of the university's Economic Crisis Response Team (ECRT).



Tammy Blackburn ('94, '01) with Cameron

“No one has believed in me more than my own mom,” he said, “and it’s good to know that my school doesn’t think of me as just a number because that’s what I thought for a long time.”

McCullough and Assistant Vice President of SDSU Alumni Dan Montoya (’04) August 21.

“You’re definitely not a number at San Diego State; you’re Cameron McCullough and you’re an Aztec,” Blackburn reassured him.

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

After some time to ponder Blackburn’s announcement, Cameron contemplated his mother’s illness, their circumstances, and their relationship, his observations reflecting less bravado and more candid assessment. He admits to being short on coping skills when it comes to her deteriorating health.

“To be honest, I’m still learning (how to cope) right now,” he said. “I tend to shut things out. I tend to not think about it.

“It has always been us two, just me and my mom, but I don’t need much family.”

And if his mom is not there?

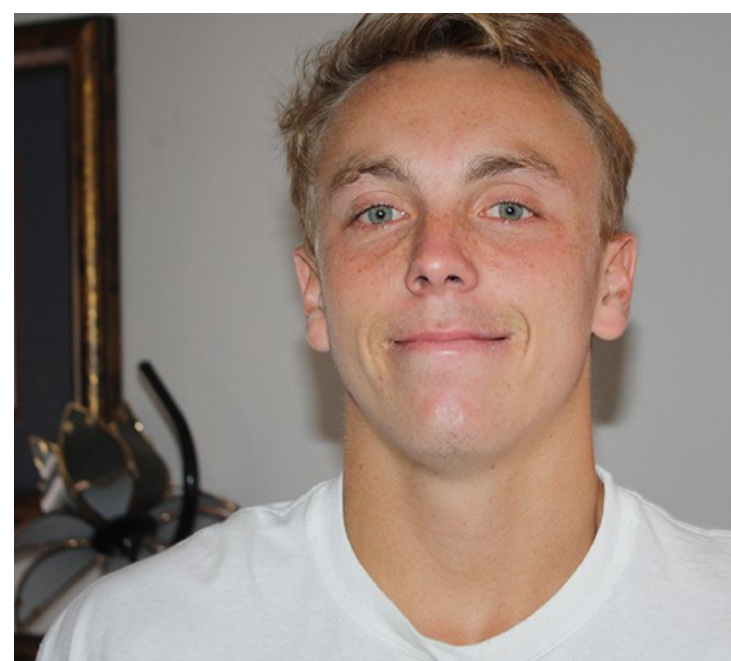
“That’s a tough one. I haven’t thought about that in a while.”

Cameron paused before completing his answer. He drew a deep breath and exhaled before continuing.

“I use everything she has taught me,” he concluded, “and I live life as best I can.”

GOING PLACES

Cones finds comfort in knowing her son’s education is covered for now no matter what may transpire in other areas of their lives. The Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund has lifted a heavy burden.



SDSU second-year student Cameron McCullough is the first recipient of funding from the new Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund.

Uncertain about the course of her battle with cancer, Cones meets each new challenge with determination and hope, banishing any thought that may creep from the corners of her mind of her only child alone in the world. Despite all she faces and all she fears, she chooses to believe Cameron will be okay.

“He’s got all the workings to be an amazing man and he is,” she reasons. “He’s my boy, though.

"I think he's going to go places - I know he will - even without me. I know he can do this now."

*Click here to make your gift to the Wallace Shatsky Blackburn Courage Through Cancer Fund now
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Rita Roberts

Oh my God Tammy what a great thing you did. I wouldn't have expected anything else from you. I am so happy that your ordeal is over with and everything is ok. Live

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Volunteers can support the university in many ways and perform a valuable service to SDSU. By identifying alumni who are committed to building on the university's excellence, we can develop an SDSU community of volunteers who will connect with and strengthen San Diego State by sharing their time, expertise and experience in areas that interest them.

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