

# Alabama sorority dedicates homecoming to raising \$17k suicide prevention

Brooke Metz, USA TODAY College, WCNC 1:19 PM, EDT October 25, 2016



(Photo: Via Twitter @BettieLocke)

A University of Alabama sorority said goodbye to a longstanding homecoming tradition this year in favor of helping a higher cause.

Each year, the school's Kappa Alpha Theta chapter sets aside about \$2,500 from its budget to create a "pomp" (a decoration made from tissue paper) to display on campus during the week-long celebration. It's a tradition that's popular at a number of large state universities, like University of Missouri

and Oklahoma State.

The theme for homecoming this year was 'leaving a legacy,' says senior Elizabeth Aune. "We wanted to find a way to leave one we're proud of."

While many groups opted to honor Alabama's unarguably top-notch athletic legacy in their pomp displays, the women of Kappa Alpha Theta went a different route.

One of their own, Megan Rondini, committed suicide in February. The 21-year-old was a beloved Theta sister, passionate animal activist and aspiring veterinarian who transferred to Southern Methodist University not long before her death to earn her degree in biological sciences.

Her death was a devastating blow to the chapter.

"Girls I didn't even know had ever talked to her had a story to share about her," Aune, who was one of Rondini's best friends, says. "She made me laugh like no one else could."

As homecoming approached, the women couldn't rationalize spending thousands of dollars to make a traditional pomp decoration. Instead, they chose to honor the life of Rondini and the more than 1,000 college students who commit suicide every year, according to Emory University research.

Suicide is second leading cause of death among those 15 to 24 years old, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, making awareness and prevention efforts increasingly urgent. And that's exactly what the women of Alabama's Theta chapter aimed to accomplish during homecoming week.

They donated their pomp fund to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and created a giant chalkboard display dedicated to suicide awareness on which passersby could write the names of those they'd lost.

"So many people walked by and said they had lost someone," says Aune. "You have a huge support system even when you don't feel it."

And their efforts didn't stop with the display. The women fundraised throughout homecoming week, keeping track of their progress on a small pomp positioned next to the chalkboard display. Within six hours, they met their first goal of \$5,000.

Since then, the sorority has raised some \$17,000 in cash, checks and online donations on their AFSP fundraising page for the organization's Out of the Darkness Walk, earning them the title of

Tuscaloosa's top fundraising team for the year.

The members also enrolled in the university's voluntary suicide prevention training program, offered to students several times in early October, so they could learn how to recognize the signs of depression and help those who might be struggling.

"If you need help in school, you see a tutor and no one questions you," says sophomore Hannah Sonstegard. "It should be the exact same way with mental health."

The women of Alabama's Kappa Alpha Theta chapter hope their actions will inspire others to follow suit.

"People from other organizations came up and told us how great they thought it was that we decided to donate to this cause," says junior Jaycie Finch. "We're hoping that donating to a good cause instead of — or even in addition to — creating a pomp will catch on as part of the homecoming tradition."

*Brooke Metz is a member of the USA TODAY College contributor network.*

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