

September 24, 2013

One-Legged Tap Dancer and Musical Theatre Student Evan Ruggiero Fights Cancer One “Step” at a Time

Dancer Evan Ruggiero, a senior musical theatre student at New Jersey's Montclair State University, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma and faced the amputation of his right leg at the age of 19. He will graduate college this school year, at 23 years old, successfully completing his degree in Fine Arts and continuing to dance — with only one leg.

On Sept. 19, 2009, Evan Ruggiero turned 19 years old. One month later, he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a rare bone cancer that began to form in his right leg. At the time, he was in the midst of rehearsals for Montclair State's production of Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens' *A Man of No Importance*.

"I was frightened," confessed Ruggiero. "I had just turned 19. It was my birthday. Something was always happening on my birthday. I didn't know what I was going to do — being told you have cancer in your leg [and] being a dancer in this career... That's very difficult to hear."

Ruggiero began dancing at age five. "I saw my sister in a dance class," he said, "and I just thought, 'Hey, this is really cool. I want to try this out.' I started out with the jazz/hip-hop class, and after that — the following year — I told my mother that I wanted to take tap... [My parents] got me a pair of tap shoes, and right at that moment, I knew that's what I wanted to do forever."

Ruggiero was certain that he would dance forever — even after he began to feel a pain in the lower half of his right leg in fall 2009. After the problem was assessed by an orthopedic surgeon, he was sent to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, a leading cancer treatment and research institution in New York City; he was diagnosed shortly thereafter and faced a number of procedures ahead.

Conversations with his doctors led to various treatments and nine surgeries — in an effort to rebuild his right leg — within a period of six months. Although the outcome seemed bright, his cancer returned, and amputation of his right leg (above the knee) seemed to be the only option.

With a serious surgery on the horizon, "I remembered about [Clayton] 'Peg Leg' Bates," said Ruggiero, "a tap dancer back in the late '30s, '40s, '50s — that entire era. He had lost his leg in a cotton gin at the age of 12, and his uncle made him a wooden peg leg, and then he just started to tap dance. He actually holds the most appearances on 'The Ed Sullivan Show.' He was the opening act. I believe it was 58 different appearances that he made. He danced for kings and queens of England, and he was just an all-around, really great inspirational guy. I didn't realize that he was going to

serve as my inspiration. I saw a video of him [when studying dance at the NJ Tap Ensemble, under the direction of Deborah Mitchell] when I was 16 years old, and I thought, 'Wow. This is really cool.'

"I said to my doctor, right before he left the room, 'I promise you: I'm going to tap dance again.' And, he said, 'I promise you: I'll be there in the front row. And, I promise you: I'll save your life.'"

His road to recovery was rockier than he'd imagined. "After the amputation happened, I found out that I was going to need very intensive chemotherapy. That all started in June 2010, and there were lots of complications — terrible, terrible side effects, some of the worst the hospital has ever seen. And, now that my cancer had come back...there was a threat that it might spread to the lungs. It did, in fact, spread to my lungs. I had two lung operations, and they pulled out eight nodules or tumors that were killed by the chemotherapy. So, luckily, the chemo was working.

"I finished up October 2011," he added. "And, it was about a week later that I put my peg leg on and started tap dancing."

The peg leg was a simple design of a blue, metal, hollowed-out pipe that can be attached to the end of the socket in Ruggiero's leg.

"[My doctor] gave it to me," Ruggiero explained. "I said, 'Thank you very much,' and I went on my way. That was it."

Immediately, Ruggiero returned to the dance studio, where he put on his peg leg, took out his video camera and began to tap. No matter how many times he fell, he would continue to get back up.

"I just started dancing and seeing what muscle memory would kick in," recounted Ruggiero. "I was taking videos of myself, so that I could track my progress, and I went back to my room after. I was showing [my roommate] Kristina Nieskens [the video](#) one night... She walked in at like 4 AM, [but] I was really excited — I was waiting all night. I said, 'Look what I did. *Look what I did tonight!*' She just said, 'Oh my God. You have to post that on YouTube and show people what you're doing.'"

Ruggiero soon became a YouTube sensation, and his dance teachers at Montclair State saw that his determination had exceeded everyone's expectations. The performer continued to tap — altering his dance vocabulary, substituting sounds with a clap and transforming his body into, what he calls, "a musical instrument."

"My first big performance was actually through Montclair State University," said Ruggiero. "We were down in Miami doing a Children Resources Foundation [benefit] for children with disabilities. Clay James, [associate professor of theatre and dance at MSU and coordinator of the University's Musical Theatre program], put [it] together... A couple days before we left, he said, 'You're doing a piece. Put a speech together. Get five-seven dancers. Choreograph it, and have it done. Present it to me tomorrow.' I said, 'Okay!' I showed him something I was working on — something simple — and we went down, and we did it. It was the first performance, and it was — I'll never forget it — the first time I had seen an audience stand up and give me a standing ovation for me tap dancing. I couldn't believe it. I got off stage, and I just started crying. I cried my eyes out."

Since his stage resurgence, Ruggiero has performed at tap festivals around the country, including St. Louis, New Jersey, Los Angeles and Buffalo. He has landed lead roles in his college productions, including the Andrew Lippa version of *The Wild Party*, in which he played Burrs. He appeared on the 12th season of "American Idol" and was praised by Mariah Carey. And, last week — on his

birthday — the performer made an [appearance](#) on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," where he tap danced on television and received a check for \$10,000.

"There were *plenty* of times when I wanted to give up and stop chemotherapy or just say, 'I've had enough of this,'" he admitted. "When I started to look around me [on the pediatric floor of the hospital] and watch all of these other children fight this disease and go through chemotherapy and live their lives every day... I just thought, 'You know what, if these kids can do it, then I can do this.' And, so I kept going."

Following graduation, Ruggiero plans to pound the pavement and pursue a career in performance. Although he knows he will face many obstacles in the audition room, he said, "I would love to be on Broadway. That would be awesome. There's nothing like live theatre... There's nothing like performing for an audience and getting that reaction from them. It's incredible."

One of his dream roles is Crutchie in the Disney musical *Newsies* because, he said lightheartedly, "That is an *awesome* role that I can *do*."

Ruggiero, who recently celebrated his 23rd birthday with Ellen DeGeneres, confided that *this* birthday was "the perfect birthday." He added that he gets checkups every six months at Sloan-Kettering. "Other than that," he said, "I'm in perfect health, and I'm trying to kick ass every day."

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