



Still dancing

Despite a tumor, 10 days in a coma and a Traumatic Brain Injury, junior Meagan Thomas keeps dancing

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Junior Meagan Thomas stretches before she practices ballet in the dance studio in Pershing Building on Nov. 10. Thomas, who underwent multiple surgeries to remove a tumor and suffered from a Traumatic Brain Injury in high school, continues to dance despite the difficulty she had with memorizing dance routines after the TBI.

BY ELIZABETH KOCH
For the Index

As junior Meagan Thomas sunbathed in her bikini on a warm day during June 2008, she didn't know about the ordeal she would soon face. When her mother came out to check on her, she quickly covered up with a towel, hoping her mother wouldn't notice.

After being asked to remove the towel, her mother saw the obvious abnormality in what should have been Thomas's toned abs. Instead of a six-pack, there was a knot the size of a fist, and the line down the middle was distorted. There was no excuse for this considering her intense workouts and vigorous dancing.

This distortion ended up being Schwannoma, a type of tumor. Three years later, Thomas is now living her life to the fullest as a Truman student. To get to this point, she had to suffer through a life-threatening surgery and a traumatic brain injury that forced her to relearn how to perform everyday tasks.

On June 8, 2008, 17-year-old Thomas underwent Magnetic Resonance Imaging, which revealed the Schwannoma, a non-cancerous, baseball-sized tumor wrapped around a nerve on her spine.

Before Thomas went in for surgery the following week, the multiple medical papers disclosing all the possible risks of surgery she signed seemed unreal, she said.

"The one-in-a-million that happens to absolutely no one is exactly what you think

about when you read all these things," she said. "Of course, everything that could've, would've, should've gone wrong [happened to] me."

Her doctor originally planned a biopsy and hoped to remove as much of the tumor as possible, but when doctors found the tumor, they realized it actually was football-sized, which seemed impossible, considering Thomas's petite frame, she said.

As a result of unforeseen complications, she suffered massive blood loss and needed numerous blood transfusions. Then, a blood clot caused from the medicine used to treat bleeding loosened in her leg and cut off the blood supply to her heart requiring CPR for 10 minutes until the medical staff could stabilize her. She underwent three more surgeries and remained in a coma for 10 days. Doctors braced her family for the possibility she wouldn't survive, she said.

Thomas also suffered from a Traumatic Brain Injury because of the blood clot, affecting her short-term memory.

After waking from the coma, Thomas stayed in the Trauma Unit, Intensive Care Unit and Rehab Hospital for 56 days. She finally was released to an outpatient hospital for seven additional months of therapy.

Thomas relearned how to walk and talk through occupational, speech and physical therapy. Her short-term memory also began improving from the five-minute span of remembrance time she had immediately after surgery. After her surgery, she couldn't remember who came to visit her in the hospital and had to figure it out from gifts, flowers or

pictures left for her.

She began her senior year at Ursuline Academy of St. Louis, going to school for half the day and spending the other half at therapy. She said her friends helped her graduate on time by making sure she kept up with her schoolwork.

Thomas received her school's dance award her senior year, which was one of her proudest accomplishments, she said. She began dancing when she was 3 years old and hasn't stopped since. The tumor never affected her dancing, though the TBI made memorizing the routine more challenging. She also received her school's Maureen Kelly Award for overcoming adversity.

"I've gone through all of this and still am doing what I wanted to do," she said. "[Winning the dance award] was one of my only hopes."

Because of her TBI, Thomas didn't have much opportunity to research where she wanted to go to college and still had two more surgeries to face before the tumor finally was removed. Those surgeries were completed successfully only eight weeks before arriving at freshman orientation at Truman. She decided to come to Truman because the St. John's Head Injury Resource Center, where she was receiving therapy, recommended it because of the school's Disability Services Program.

Thomas said the program was extremely helpful, especially during her freshman year of college. She had note-takers and received extra time on tests because of her memory. Now, as a junior, she has recovered enough to no longer need those services.

Disability Services Coordinator Vicky Wehner said Disability Services assists more than 100 students, but the type of assistance depends on the student's disability. She said they look at what resources the student has used in the past and how well it worked.

"Without giving them an unfair advantage, we are here to level the playing field for those students," she said.

Wehner said that with Thomas, besides providing note-takers and additional test time, Disabilities Services also has done a lot of problem solving with her, such as scheduling tests on short notice.

Besides the Disability Services Program,

Thomas said the presence of a dance program was one of the biggest influences of her college decision.

She said that because of her memory, she attended extra The Society of Dance Arts dance rehearsals and always was placed near another dancer in case her memory lapsed. Her sophomore year, Thomas was on the executive board, and danced in an extra routine choreographed just weeks before the recital, proving how far she had come, she said.

Graduate student Kate Easson taught Thomas for four semesters in Beginning Jazz, and shared two semesters with her on the executive board.

She said Thomas often was the only student to show up to the extra review sessions, so they got to know each other really well.

Easson said she noticed at first that Thomas was sometimes spacey, but she always gave her best effort. When Thomas told Easson about her health condition, she said she realized why Thomas seemed the way she did.

She said Thomas is an inspiration because of her kindness and positivity. Easson said many people never would realize what Thomas has gone through because she is so involved and works hard to go above and beyond expectations.

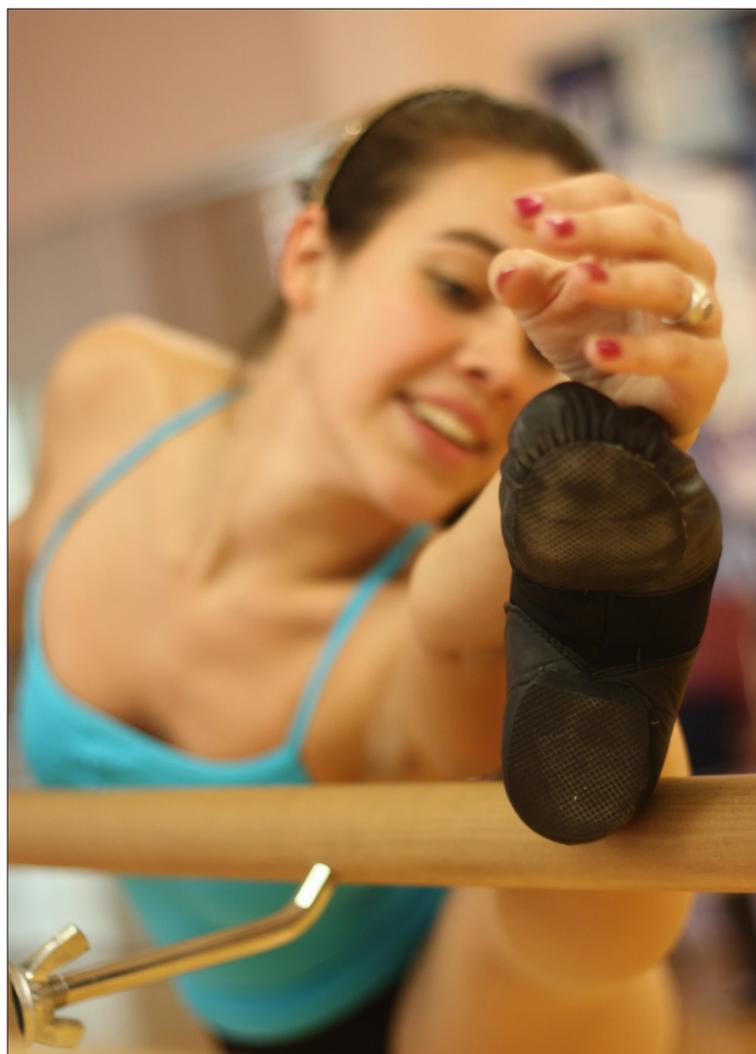
"[Thomas] is just a testament to how much you can do when you set your mind to it," Easson said.

Thomas said she doesn't want people to view her as "the sick girl," because all her health complications are in the past, and she's moved on. She said she wants people to solely see her as who she is without taking that into account.

"Once people know, in my mind, I wouldn't be able to tell if they were doing things nice for me just because they felt like it, or if it was out of feeling bad for me," Thomas said. "And I've never wanted that pity."

Thomas is a pre-occupational therapy health science major because she wants to help students who have been in similar situations, she said.

"I want to be able to say 'I know exactly what you're going through,'" she said. "I've been there, I've done that, and I've gotten over it."



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Thomas warms up Nov. 10. Thomas has been dancing since she was 3 years old.