

# Cardinal Athletics

## “One Bird Family”

*The Cardinal lacrosse teams faced a challenging year that included illness, disability, and tragedy. They learned that “team” translates to “family.”*



Had they won the Landmark championship on May 4, it would have been the sixth year in a row CUA's women's lacrosse team took the conference title. Instead they were defeated by Susquehanna.

Still, on the bus ride from Pennsylvania back to Washington, the team had reason to celebrate. Riding with them was sophomore midfielder Tori Neill, who had taken the semester off, battling Hodgkin's lymphoma and thyroid cancer.

“Having Tori on that bus with us, riding back to campus all together at the end of the season — that meant more than any win,” says Head Coach Meghan McDonogh.

Neill had arrived at CUA to start her spring semester early in January. Just five days into preseason practice she returned home to Voorhees, N.J., to look into why she wasn't feeling well. The diagnosis came on Jan. 25.

“That call from Tori was tough,” says McDonogh. “But right from the beginning Tori set the tone for her coaches, her teammates, and her family. She was going to remain upbeat and that meant so were we.”

Neill informed her teammates of her diagnosis via Skype. She reassured them she would be OK. Then, she set out a plan to graduate on time with the Class of 2015 and enrolled in two online courses, followed by more summer courses. And between chemotherapy treatments, she volunteered as an assistant lacrosse coach at her alma mater, Eastern High School. She also let her doctors know her goal was to return for the fall 2013 semester. Her final radiation treatment will come just prior to the start of the 2013–2014 academic year.

To show their support, the men's and women's lacrosse teams wore purple (the awareness color for both types of cancer Neill was battling) shoelaces at all games.

“My teammates and my coaches kept me up-to-date on practices, games, and everything else the team was up to. I never felt like I wasn't part of the team. I made it to three

games and just being on the field, standing on the sidelines, warming up the goalies — that was vital to my recovery,” says Neill.

Well before her diagnosis, Neill had been among the ranks of lacrosse players who turned out on Capitol Hill during the fall 2012 semester for the WellockStrong Capitol Dash. They were there to support sophomore midfielder Chris Wellock and his family.

Chris's dad Bill Wellock (B.A. 1981) had been in a traumatic bike accident in July 2012. He was left paralyzed from the waist down. By August, he was beginning the long, still-ongoing process of rehabilitation. More than 100 people came out for the Wellock fundraiser, including both lacrosse teams, Cardinal coaches and players from other teams, alumni, and Wellock family members. They raised more than \$15,000 for Bill's rehabilitation and associated expenses.

“I'll never forget it. It was so much more than the money,” said Chris. “For all those people to turn out and stand behind my family and me, it meant so much to know that others care.”

Men's Head Lacrosse Coach Brooks Singer helped organize the WellockStrong event along with Chris and senior defender Ryan McDonough, a teammate of Chris's and neighbor of the Wellocks in Wyomissing, Pa. Within hours of the accident last July, McDonough contacted Singer. Chris recalls getting a text from his coach the next day. “He just let me know that he and the team were here for me. And that helped.”

Following the fundraiser, Singer says the team started to look toward the spring season with the goal of having Chris's dad back in the stands. “Chris's parents were at most of the games during his freshman season. We knew it would mean a lot to everyone to see Bill back cheering for the team. That first game when he and Chris's mom arrived with the McDonoughs was a special day for our whole team.”

During his recovery, Bill Wellock says his spirit has been buoyed by the show of solidarity from his CUA classmates who have remained

friends over the years. “That was special for Chris to see and I think it helped him start to realize his friends at CUA would continue to be there for him throughout his life.”

Neill says she too realized that as she battled her illness. “We have this saying in Athletics that ‘we are one bird family.’ But as my coaches and teammates continued to show their support, it began to mean even more to me. I knew that this would be a family I keep for life.”

As the lacrosse season drew to an end, the strength of the Cardinal lacrosse family was tested again. In late April, star player Brendan Englert was critically injured in a car accident. A few days later he passed away in a northern Virginia hospital surrounded by family, coaches, and teammates. The next day, a Friday night, he was remembered at a memorial Mass at St. Vincent de Paul Chapel attended by more than 300 members of the CUA community including the Englert family.

“His parents and his sisters were so gracious. They were comforting us. They allowed us to be part of their grief. They didn't have to do that,” recalled Singer. “But to them, we are part of Brendan's family.”

The men's and women's lacrosse players kept each other close during the end of the semester. Parents brought potluck dinners every night and the players ate together with their coaches, who used the time to check in on them. “Our coaches kept reminding us to let them know how we were doing especially if we were struggling. They said to call any one of them even if it was 3 in the morning,” said Chris Wellock.

Like the women's season, the men's lacrosse season didn't end with a championship. And it didn't matter. The team cancelled their last game in the wake of Englert's death. On Sunday, May 5, they closed their season with an inter-squad scrimmage in honor of their lost teammate, a gifted attackman from Fayetteville, N.Y., who was a mechanical engineering major. With the women's team and lacrosse parents (including the Wellocks)

in the stands and more than 35 men's lacrosse alumni playing with them, they took to the field for the love of the game — a fitting tribute to their teammate who had racked up 31 goals with 21 assists to lead the Landmark conference in points during the 2013 season.

In May, Englert was named an All-American after earning Landmark Conference Player of the Year. Singer can't help but smile when he remembers his player. “He was simply nice to everyone. He was full of life, a practical joker. He had a special spirit. He touched people. And it was such a joy to watch him play, to see that backflip after he scored a goal. He had such a pure love of the game.”

Player and now assistant women's lacrosse coach Katie Miller designed a T-shirt in honor of Englert using his jersey number three and his first and last initial in Cardinal red at the beginning of the word BELIEVE. Underneath the number and word, it read, “Always on our minds, forever in our hearts.”

“Brendan will stay with the lacrosse family always. We will keep his memory alive,” says Singer. — E.N.W.

Web Extra: View a photo gallery of “One Bird Family” at [cuamagazine.cua.edu](http://cuamagazine.cua.edu).

## Cardinals Awarded President's Cup

CUA's Athletics program was awarded the 2012–2013 Landmark Conference President's All-Sports Cup. The cup is awarded based on regular season conference standings as well as results in Landmark postseason competition. The Cardinals earned four conference titles during the 2012–2013 academic year. They captured five Coaching Staff of the Year awards, along with seven major conference awards, including five Player of the Year and two Rookie of the Year honors. Go to [cuamagazine.cua.edu](http://cuamagazine.cua.edu) for a link to the full story.