

# The Forrest Spence Fund

## Helping Others Find Light In The Darkness

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Although many of us face adversity within our own lives, rarely do we encounter individuals who have overcome extreme difficulties and emerged as a stronger person determined to make a positive impact on the world about us.

Brittany Spence, Omicron (U of Tennessee), is a shining example of someone with the ability to take a challenge and build her own bridge to overcome it. Her strength and wisdom are inspiring and are a living example of the heart of AOII. As Stella George Stern Perry once wrote, "That which makes our bond is promise certain of success. Let us follow our ensign devotedly, utterly and bravely. For our purpose cannot fail." Brittany, and her husband David, channeled the devastating loss they felt after

the death of their young son into a way to serve others through a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization to assist families of critically ill children during their darkest days. Her story provides motivation for each of us to live out the mission of Alpha Omicron Pi every day.

Brittany's AOII journey began with our Omicron Chapter at the U of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1998. Brittany was very impressed by the reputation of the chapter on the college campus and even more so by the caliber of women that made up the Omicron Chapter. Soon after joining, Brittany became very active within her chapter and the campus community. For Greek Life, she was on the New Member Education Committee, was Panhellenic Chaplain, Assistant Vice President of Membership Recruitment and then served as the Vice President of Membership Recruitment. Formal recruitment helped her develop her most fond memories of Alpha Omicron Pi, particularly during pre-recruitment work week. She loved spending time with all of her sisters in the same place for three to four days at a time while preparing for recruitment that would take place the

following week. This is where she felt that she spent the most quality time with her sisters and it helped create strong relationships among them. Brittany was also involved on campus as a UT orientation leader, a member of ACE (All Campus Events), Women's Director of the Cross Ministry, and an alternative fall break leader. Instead of going home or going on a vacation during her fall or spring breaks, Brittany attended three alternative spring break programs. She found this to be very fulfilling as 15-20 strangers joined together simply for the purpose of serving others. Brittany's life of service would not end. Although she was not prepared for the series of events that led to the family establishing the Forrest Spence Fund, many families have since been positively affected because of the Fund's selfless dedication to its mission.

On September 10, 2007, Forrest Spence, Brittany and David's first child, was born. Shortly after his birth, Forrest became sick with Group B Streptococcus. He was transported to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee and began a desperate

fight for this life. During this time, his parents experienced several moments of both highs and lows, but amidst all of their struggles, they were met with significant amounts of care and compassion. Brittany and David welcomed the loving kindness of close family and friends and also sometimes complete strangers. This gave them hope and encouraged them to push forward even though the journey was becoming more and more difficult. Although his parents had gathered enough strength to keep going, this was not the case for Forrest. On November 4, 2007, only fifty-five days after arriving at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, Forrest passed away.

In light of their experience and as a continuing tribute to their son, the Forrest Spence Fund was founded in 2008 to assist with the non-medical needs of critically ill children and their families throughout the Mid South. The fund began as a way for the Spence family and for others to support families dealing with similar situations. Also, the fund began to give back to regional hospitals, such as Le Bonheur, who have amazing staff members willing to fight for those that need help the most.

The work of the fund today can be categorized in four ways. First, the fund helps individual and family needs, specifically meeting the needs of children and their families as they battle illnesses that significantly affect their lives. Also, the fund provides institutional support for family-centered care. Next, the fund connects families with counselors who can help them face the critical or chronic illness. Lastly, the Fund provides up to \$5,000 for families through need-based grants. Provided care usually falls within one of these four categories and the fund's staff and volunteers are careful to treat each family individually based on their own unique experience.

These families receive emotional support, guidance, and counseling with the help of the Forrest Spence Fund. An employee from Le Bonheur states, "I feel that one of the most important services the fund provides is to pay for counseling services for the families that are grieving the loss of a child. Many families cannot afford to pay for counseling services, but they are often

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necessary for the healing process. We in the NICU are very grateful that so many non-medical needs of our families are being met through the Forrest Spence Fund." Although counseling is one service that is offered, the fund also helps to provide essential physical resources for families.

The Forrest Spence Fund offers complimentary family dinners at local hospitals, care bags for families, individual grants, and assistance for typical family expenses. The fund really tries to help families feel as though they are at home during their time spent at the hospital. Also, the fund takes into account other expenses that health insurance providers will not cover. One parent stated, "The survival tote bag the fund provided was full of comforting gifts. It held a journal for our stay, a washed pink lovie that was ready to be held by our daughter, and supplies to make breast-feeding easier. We are thankful beyond words for the fund's continuous support and for the amazing people they sent to help us on our journey."

Although this gives one person's perspective of the fund, there are hundreds of others eager to share their story as well. Whether these individuals were positively impacted by the supplies given to them, the family dinners, the free counseling, or the general grants for additional assistance, it is evident that the warmth displayed by Brittany and her family has significantly encouraged those embarking on a similar journey.

When asked what advice Brittany had for AOII sisters who have experienced a comparable loss, she said, "It will be the hardest thing you will ever go through, but you will survive it and be stronger because of it. Lean on God, family, friends, and others who have gone through it and find a way to

give back to others." Luckily, Brittany has four Omicron sisters whom she has remained close to since their initiation in 1998. They have been in each others' weddings and have rallied around one another through the good times and the bad. Specifically, these women help each year with the fund's 5k, in addition to donating financially. If you are interested in donating or volunteering for the Forrest Spence Fund, or would like to read more about the Spence family's story, please visit their website at <http://www.forrestspencefund.org>.



Photos at left are a loving tribute to Forrest and his parents. Above, Brittany and David Spence now have three more beautiful children. Austin (5), Miller (3) and Maggie (1).