

Madison corps unite two families in fight against ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease

Drum and bugle corps has a rich heritage in Wisconsin, with marching units scattered throughout the state. With thousands of young adults in the activity, dating and serious relationships among drum and bugle corps alumni are not uncommon, in many cases leading to marriage.

This was the case for Madison residents, John Weekes and Cristin McKenna, who were marching members from two different drum and bugle corps. They married in 2006 and are now proud parents of sons Michael and Matthew. Their union was typical in many ways. However, they shared an especially unique bond -- each lost a close family member to Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).



John lost his brother, Steve Weekes (*far left*), in 2005 at the age of 44 and Cristin lost her father, Mike McKenna (*left*), in 2001 at age 53.

Family roots in Wisconsin drum & bugle corps

The McKenna and Weekes families are passionate supporters of drum and bugle corps, and their involvement dates back many years. The families were highly involved with the Madison Scouts, Madison Junior Scouts, Appleton Americanos and the Capitol Sound. Mike McKenna began with the Madison Scouts and was once a member of the board of directors.

The Weekes brothers -- Karl, Steve and John -- joined the Madison Scouts in the early 1980s and later Steve became an instructor for the Madison Scouts. Meanwhile, the McKenna siblings, Cristin and Kelley (*far left*), marched with the Appleton Americanos, and Joe and Tom (*left*) marched in the Madison Junior Scouts.

John Weekes and Cristin McKenna (*below*) met in 1996 because of their family's dedication to the drum and bugle corps activity. Following Mike McKenna's diagnosis in 1998 and Steve Weekes' diagnosis in 1999,



John and Cristin had their first date in 2002. In the following years their relationship would grow, but neither Mike McKenna nor Steve Weekes would be at their wedding.

ALS disease finds advocate in Madison Scouts

Steve Weekes wasted no time becoming an advocate for ALS after his diagnosis. While waiting for treatment at an ALS clinic, accompanied by siblings Monica and John Weekes, he resolved to create an ALS fund-raiser. At the time, Steve was the drummer for the band Wall of Sound and the brass-heavy group eagerly volunteered to headline the fund-raising event. In 2000, the first annual "Rockin' for A Cure" ALS fund-raiser kicked off with the help of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and alumni of the Madison Scouts Drum & Bugle Corps.

The Madison corps quickly became a passionate bedrock of support. In addition





to providing musical performances for the fund-raiser, alumni gathered at each annual event to sing the signature rallying song for the corps, *You'll Never Walk Alone*. Adding to the losses from the disease, ALS struck again in 2010, with Madison Scouts alum Charles Eikel (*left*) passing away from the disease. He was a marching member in the 1950s and later became a member of the board of directors.

The ALS Association Wisconsin Chapter

In 2010, "Rockin' for A Cure" partnered with the ALS Association Wisconsin Chapter, the premiere flagship of

ALS support for research and patient services in Wisconsin. The partnership elevated the fund-raiser and strengthened the group's commitment. At the 2013 and 2015 events, ALS Association Patient Advocate Jim Eutizzi gave a tearful, yet hopeful and inspiring speech. He was close to everyone's hearts and in 2016 the group were crushed when ALS took his life.

Organizers continue the battle for Jim, Steve, Mike, Chuck and the thousands of patients currently fighting this disease. "It's why we do what we do," says Kelley McKenna. Now in its 18th year, "Rockin' for A Cure" has raised more than \$110,000. Funding provides services and research funds for Wisconsin patients.

This year's event was again held at the Radisson Hotel Madison on April 22. Musical entertainment included The Big Payback, Jim White and The Jim Ott Brass Ensemble 3rd Coast. Attendees bid on more than 100 silent auction items and enjoyed appetizers and a cash bar. This year's guest speakers from the ALS Association Wisconsin Chapter included Executive Director Melanie Roach-Bekos and Patient Advocate John Jaeckel.

For more details on the project, contact "Rockin' for A Cure," Mike Anello, Director, www.rockinforacure.org or e-mail: info@rockinforacure.org. The ALS Association Wisconsin Chapter can be reached by contacting Executive Director Melanie Roach Bekos or visiting the organization's Web site: www.alsawi.org.

(Top right) McKenna family; (middle right) Weekes family; (right) Steve and Zach Weekes.

