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# GRATEFUL

*for*

# EACH DAY

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*Alumni often say the life lessons they learned in college are as meaningful as their education.*

STORY BY Kristen McConaughey

PHOTO BY Phil Shockley

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*Clayton Vaught survived a bout of cancer before graduating in December with his bachelor's in hotel and restaurant administration.*

*The alum says one of the most important things he learned in college is not to take things for granted.*

*“If I’m in a room with someone I care about, I don’t leave without saying ‘I love you,’” he says.*

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*(story continues)*



**A**fter graduating from Broken Arrow High School in 2004, Clayton Vaught decided to attend OSU because he loved the campus atmosphere.

At OSU he made many friends as a member of Phi Delta Theta fraternity and the Club Managers Association of America. He also contributed to "America's Greatest Homecoming Celebration" by serving on the Homecoming Steering Committee and was a member of "Students Today, Alumni Tomorrow."

Vaught stayed active throughout college despite severe back pain that became too intense his senior year.

"He called me after his last final in December 2008 and said, 'Mom, the pain is so horrible I cannot sleep,'" says Vaught's mother, Debbie.

Additional testing by doctors revealed Vaught had chondrosarcoma, a type of cancer that grows from cartilage. The

Together, they traveled to Houston to seek treatment from a highly ranked cancer doctor, who recommended surgery.

"There were five doctors and three anesthesiologists in the operating room with him for more than 18 hours," Debbie says.

After surgery, Vaught was given the worst-case scenario that he might not be able to walk again. He struggled with physical therapy and rehabilitation, but the painful exercises began producing results.

"We literally saw miracles happen every day," Debbie says.

Vaught spent just over a year recovering from his surgery, always focused on the road back to OSU. He says the smallest things meant the most, like being able to wiggle his toes.

He returned to OSU in fall 2010, determined to graduate. "He got in his truck and drove back to OSU," Debbie

"It is something that shows my accomplishments as far as education and what I worked through to get it."

Vaught is now two-years cancer free and works in the customer service department of Hilti, a Tulsa company that sells power tools and fastening systems.

"I am certainly glad that he was a student here at OSU," Ryan says. "I wish



COURTESY PHOTO

Clayton Vaught shows off his new diploma during fall 2010 commencement ceremonies. He received his bachelor's degree in hotel and restaurant administration after surviving a bout with cancer.

## *"We literally saw miracles happen every day." — DEBBIE VAUGHT*

cancer was located in his pelvis and sacrum, a bone at the base of the spine, which was causing Vaught's excruciating back pain.

"It was kind of a shock to me," Vaught says. "I had to take two semesters off and that really affected my plans."

Vaught's mother says she will never forget the day she found out her son had cancer and would have to leave OSU. She immediately called the School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration to explain the situation.

"The day I called them, I couldn't even talk," Debbie says. "They were phenomenal. They helped me get everything situated so he could just leave."

After visiting with doctors and having a biopsy, Vaught and his family found out they were dealing with a deadly and slow-growing cancer that doesn't respond to chemotherapy or radiation.

says. "He wanted to finish school and get on with his life."

Although Vaught had to rely on crutches, he kept a positive attitude.

In December, Vaught's dedication paid off when he walked across the stage of Gallagher-Iba Arena during commencement.

William Ryan, director of the School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration, commends Vaught for his dedication to learning all he could despite his circumstances.

"I think we all took the approach that he came first and his classes came second," Ryan says. "And when he was ready to complete his classes and move forward, we were ready to help him."

Vaught's mother, knowing how special graduation was to her son, surprised him with an official OSU class ring.

"I wasn't expecting it," Vaught says.

him all the best success in the future."

Vaught's battle with cancer may be over, but his connection to OSU is not. He's still "bleeding orange," he says, and plans to join the OSU Alumni Association.

"I plan on getting season football tickets this season and rooting for the Cowboys," Vaught says. "I'm just grateful for every day I have." □