

# Popular Howard Student Loses Cancer Battle

Contributed by Jessica Lewis -- Black College Wire  
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Aaron Bonner receives bachelor's degree posthumously

Chad Williams-Bey was among hundreds of Howard University students to drive eight hours to Cincinnati to pay homage to his dear friend, Aaron Bonner. Last week, members of the Howard community came together to remember Bonner, 24, who passed away on July 2.

"I went for closure," said Williams-Bey, a senior political science and economics major. "I did not feel like I owed anything to him, I just feel honored to have known him." Williams-Bey said about 700 people attended Bonner's funeral, half of whom were his Howard family.

After completing his freshman year in 2003, Bonner was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal carcinoma, a disease caused by a genetic mutation that spreads from the back of the throat to other parts of the body. He has been fighting not only to survive, but to earn a Howard degree ever since.

When doctors gave Bonner just two weeks to live, family and friends contacted Howard University senior administrators in an attempt to persuade them to bestow an honorary degree on Bonner. Although he had to withdraw from school in the fall of 2007, Bonner hoped to obtain his degree in advertising and public relations and go on to law school.

"He kind of lived for Howard towards the end," Gary Waldon, Bonner's stepfather, said. "Well, just the whole time. He just loved Howard University."

After several letters were written on his behalf to the university, the family was asked to write a letter to Jannette L. Dates, Dean of the John H. Johnson School of Communications, to continue their pursuit for an honorary degree. The school decided, instead, to grant him a posthumous degree. "It is a rare honor," said David Woods, an associate dean of the communications school.

Before his passing, negotiations were already underway for the completion of the task.

In a university-issued statement, Dates wrote, "His spirit of determination and commitment to completing his education at the Howard University John H. Johnson School of Communications should serve as an inspiration to the entire Howard family."

The memo also announced that there will be a brick with his name on it to be added to the Howard Founders Walk. This program allows members of the Howard community to purchase a brick on a path that leads up to Howard Hall to help fund its development and maintenance. Howard Hall is the oldest structure at the university and was home to one of its founders. A brick costs \$50 or \$100 depending on where it is placed.

Students came together on campus to honor Bonner in their own way. Upon receiving news of his critical condition, Alpha Phi Omega Fraternity, Inc. participated in a 12-hour prayer and fast from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. as that was

Bonner's line number. The service fraternity held a memorial on July 5 on Howard's campus.

"The purpose was to allow us to come together as one and pay respects to Aaron in accordance with what Alpha Phi Omega says to do when a brother passes," said senior legal communications major Jeri Ogden, a fellow member of Alpha Phi Omega.

Beyond ritual, Ogden was involved with the service because "Aaron had been a bright smile on unbearable days." Despite his battle with cancer, Bonner became a member of Alpha Phi Omega, Campus Pals and was involved in student government.

The Howard University Student Association (HUSA) passed a resolution celebrating Bonner's life. The resolution officially renames the Community Service Organization of the Year award after him. It outlines that the campus organization that will receive this award must have a commitment to service and philanthropic contributions that benefit the university and the community.

The student association planned a second memorial service for Bonner July 15 on Howard's Main Yard. "Bonner was a mentor and a very genuine person," said HUSA President Nicholas Owen. "Those qualities in an individual are very rare now and days." Jessica Lewis is a student at Howard University and a member of the Hilltop student newspaper staff.