



‘I wished for a wild story to tell’: Evan Hirschensohn remembered by students, family for optimism, compassion

Ashley Dong, Assistant Data Visualizations Editor

Evan Hirschensohn loved being a Wildcat.

The political science and international studies major was a Peer Adviser for Wildcat Welcome and a member of the cappella group Extreme Measures.

Hirschensohn, 21, died on April 22 after a nearly two-year battle with cancer.

“Evan genuinely brought light to everyone he met,” Weinberg junior Emani Larkin, one of his close friends, said.

Ever since he was little, Evan wanted to make a difference in the world, Kelly Hirschensohn, Evan’s mother, said. Even before he was diagnosed with cancer, he volunteered for Relay For Life, an organization partnered with the American Cancer Society that is dedicated to ending cancer.

He also volunteered with Tomorrow’s Rainbow, a children’s grief program that utilizes equine-assisted psychotherapy.

As he recovered from his first bout with cancer in the summer of 2025, he also interned with the Palm Beach County Board of County Commissioners, researching issues with water storage and food insecurity.

“He was very passionate about doing the right thing on a global scale,” Kelly Hirschensohn said.

‘An extraordinary human being’

Weinberg junior Eliza Marcus said she met Evan through Instagram before they arrived on campus.

After three years of friendship, she remains in awe of his emotional intelligence.



Photo courtesy of Sarah Hirschensohn

Evan Hirschensohn is remembered for his emotional intelligence, sense of humor and commitment to making a difference.

“He knew how to make people feel seen and heard and loved, and I think he was very wise in a way that a lot of 20 year olds aren’t,” Marcus said.

Weinberg Prof. Danielle Gilbert got to know Evan when he was in her class in Fall Quarter. He had recently switched from physics to the political science major and had many questions about her research and career, she said.

“It became quite obvious to me, over the course of those conversations, just what an extraordinary human being he was,” Gilbert said. “He was faced with the rawest deal anyone could have, yet I never saw him being anything less than grateful, enthusiastic and optimistic about his future and his community.”

‘He was so confidently himself’

Evan received his first cancer diagnosis during Thanksgiving Break 2024, and was told the same day that doctors would likely have to amputate his left arm.

His specific diagnosis was an extra-axial chordoma, an extremely rare form of cancer. Chordomas usually appear in the central nervous system, but Evan’s first appeared in his arm as a “poorly differentiated” tumor, which meant it was gel-like and harder to detect.

In March 2025, his left arm was amputated. For the last year of his life, Evan lived with a prosthetic, which was heavy to wear and required a steep learning curve. In an interview conducted in late January, Evan compared the process of learning how to operate the prosthetic to learning a new language.

“When I went back to school in the fall, I was scared that I would drop my plate as I was walking to my seat, and I think I did. I spilled a cup a few times,” Evan said with a laugh.

Sarah Hirschensohn, Evan’s sister, said she’d always admired Evan and looked up to him, despite being four years older.

“Personally, I would have been in the house all day, scared to go out,” Sarah Hirschensohn said. “But he was so confidently himself, making jokes about not having an arm.”

For Halloween, Evan dressed up as Bethany Hamilton, a professional surfer who lost her arm in a shark attack. He donned a blond wig and doused his arm stump in fake blood.

Reflecting on Evan’s enthusiasm for new experiences and living life to its fullest, his family shared a quote that they feel represents Evan well, which he also used in a TikTok video in 2024: “I didn’t wish for an easy life; I wished for a wild story to tell.”

‘I need to use my story’

In 2024, shortly after he received his first diagnosis, Evan started a fundraising campaign page for the National Pediatric Cancer Foundation. With his birthday approaching in December, he asked all his friends and family to donate to the cause in lieu of a gift.

Since being diagnosed, Evan doubled down on his mission to help others with cancer.

“I’ve become more and more in tune with the fact that I have unfinished business in this life,” Evan said in January. “I need to use my story to actually make a difference.”

He surpassed his goal of \$15,000 and, at the time of publication, raised more than \$17,300. The foundation, awed by his gift, reached out to personally thank him.

At a regular check-up during Thanksgiving Break 2025, Evan found out that the cancer had metastasized to his lung and brain. He started a second birthday fundraising page, this time for the Nicklaus Children’s Hospital in Miami, where he received treatment. At the time of publication, his page has raised over \$15,600.

When he passed in April, his family started a page in his honor for the Chordoma Foundation, which is dedicated to funding research for Evan’s specific type of cancer. There, the Hirschensohns have raised more than \$27,800 at the time of publication.

A funeral and a celebration of life happened in Evan's hometown of Boca Raton, Florida, in late April, and several of Evan's friends from NU attended. Sarah Hirschensohn said these events were "filled with such love and light."

Larkin, Evan's close friend at NU, helped plan an on-campus memorial for Evan's friends and family, which happened on May 3. Attendees wrote messages to Evan on lanterns and painted a rock by the Lakefill in his honor, with the message "Live Like Evan."



Photo courtesy of Kelly Hirschensohn

According to Kelly Hirschensohn, Evan said his happy place was on the Lakefill, sitting on a bench and looking across the lake at the Chicago skyline.

Two days before Evan's final hospitalization in March, he gave a speech for a Relay for Life event at his high school alma mater, North Broward Preparatory School.

"Cancer may have weakened my body, but it strengthened my spirit, and I will always have gratitude for that," Evan said in his speech.

Due to medical leave, Evan was only on campus for five quarters out of the nine he spent as an NU student. But, even when he was stuck in a hospital bed in Florida, Evan itched to return to school.

"He wanted so badly to travel abroad and go to London," Sarah Hirschensohn said. "He was filling out applications in the hospital."

'His heart and mind were still fighting'

Evan's family will remember him for his "amazing voice (and) wicked sense of humor," Kelly Hirschensohn said.

His sister recalls how, when Evan was walking around missing an arm and with his hair growing back in after chemotherapy, people would thank him for his service, mistaking him for a U.S. veteran. He would respond with, “You’re welcome,” and sometimes even tried to get veteran discounts.

“He does the craziest things, but it’s never malicious,” Sarah Hirschensohn said. “His whole attitude about how he lived life despite all of those issues is so inspiring.”

Weinberg junior Noah Padilla, Evan’s close friend and roommate, visited Evan in his final weeks. Padilla has dealt with a rare chronic illness his entire life, so the two supported each other in their health struggles.

“Even when his body was declining, his heart and his mind were still fighting for the people that he loved and for the life that he wanted to live,” Padilla said. “That is something I will carry for the rest of my life.”

Even in his final days, Evan remained focused on the positive impact he could have on his community.

“Time is the only currency that is valued in how much you spend, not how much you save, and I want to spend that time trying to leave this world in a better state than I found it in,” Evan said in his speech. “It doesn’t matter what happens to me tomorrow if I’m fulfilling my purpose today.”

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Student body weighs impact to Black community, controversy over racial slur as Lovers & Madmen cancels final ‘Assassins’ shows

Madeline King and Ashley Dong

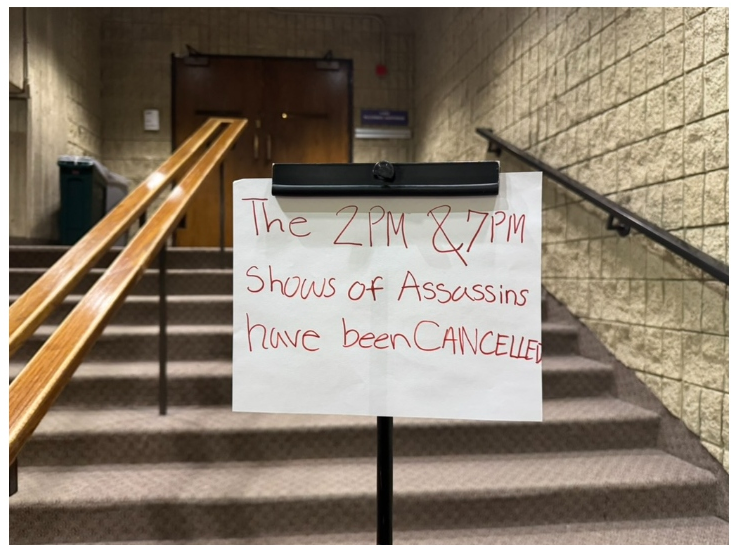
Content warning: This article discusses racism and the use of the N-word.

The Northwestern student body erupted into public discussion regarding the use of the N-word in Lovers & Madmen’s production of “Assassins” and the slur’s impact on Black communities this weekend. L&M, a student theatre board, canceled the show’s final two performances and has since published an official apology, voicing the board’s commitment to prioritizing diverse perspectives going forward.

The cancellation announcement was made by an L&M member to attendees waiting to enter the Norris University Center McCormick Auditorium just before the 2 p.m. Saturday performance. Those anticipating the performance of the Tony-Award-winning Stephen Sondheim musical — based on America’s presidential assassins — talked to cast and production team members before leaving Norris with unredeemed tickets.

Preceding the decision to forfeit the remaining shows, “Assassins” garnered a great deal of attention on social media after production team members uploaded a content warning to the “Assassins” Instagram account on Thursday. The post informed audience members of potentially unsettling content in the musical, including the use of the N-word by white character John Wilkes Booth — portrayed by a white actor — in the second song, “The Ballad of Booth.”

The L&M board uploaded the same post separately to its Instagram account before opening night and included a link in the account’s bio to a one-page document of resources related to the usage of the N-word. The document additionally offered three bullet points to explain what contextual and character development elements the use of the N-word adds to “Assassins.”



Madeline King/The Daily Northwestern

The decision to cancel the final two shows of Assassins was announced right before the 2 p.m. show on Saturday, while audience members waited to be let in.

The resources document referenced the following as being reasons for the N-word's inclusion in the song: "breaks the audience's building sympathy with Booth," "places a significant contradiction in Booth's world view and the lyrics" and "alleviates the tension building in the song" as audience members "are (subconsciously) waiting for this moment in the show despite it being shocking."

The L&M board did not respond to The Daily's requests for comment before the time of publication.

Some students took to social media to condemn the usage of the N-word in a production featuring a predominately non-Black cast and crew, calling upon the production to either remove the word from the song or cancel its final two shows.

The calls to action mostly came in the form of Instagram stories and comments under the content warning post on the "Assassins" account. Other discussions occurred on NU's Fizz, a college-specific social media platform that allows students to post anonymous messages to others at their school.

L&M also came under fire for disabling the comments section under the content warning post on its Instagram page. Some commenters on the "Assassins" content warning post claimed owners of the show's account had deleted certain comments calling out the show for its usage of a racial slur. As of the time of publication, comments on the "Assassins" Instagram account are turned on, but comments on two of the three most recent L&M posts are turned off.

SESP sophomore Noel Matthews was among the commenters under the "Assassins" account post. Matthews said to The Daily that as a Black woman, it was "frustrating" to see the word used in this context and that advocating for its removal "should not only be Black people's fight."

"Putting on this play and using that word in that statement is a form of violence," Matthews said. "Whether you are complicit with it in solely a theatre sense or a non-theatrical sense, using the N-word is violent. It's linguistic violence, and that should not be condoned by anybody."

Other students echoed this sentiment. Communication sophomore Elebetel Negusse, who is involved in NU's theatre community, described the usage of the N-word as a "racist action" with "nothing else to defend it."

Negusse added that the inclusion of the N-word was "inconsiderate" of NU's Black community.

"I think from now on, it's about time to start having conversations within both Northwestern, but especially within the NU theatre community, about anti-Blackness and what it has done to the Black students in the theatre community, Black students in the artist community," Negusse said.

Weinberg junior Aja Frazier, who served as the show's dramaturg — a role that involved researching the show to provide important context and insights to the rehearsal room — also spoke out on social media Sunday.

"I am not a Black 'artist' who wanted to fit in with NU white theater and therefore disregarded my community," Frazier said in a statement linked on her Instagram story. Rather, she joined the production because of "its relevance to today's climate" and wanted to "make it a safe environment in a white-dominant theater space," she said in the statement.

Though Frazier joined the team after the production process had initially begun, she was informed by other team members that conversations around the decision to include or exclude the N-word had started by the time the audition process began, she told The Daily. These conversations involved Frazier once she joined the production and continued until mere hours before the show opened, she said.

Frazier, who clarified that she spoke to The Daily as an individual and not a spokesperson for L&M or "Assassins," said she personally engaged in conversations in the rehearsal room surrounding the usage of the N-word. As the dramaturg, she researched what Sondheim said regarding the use of the slur in the musical and the views of theatre artists both advocating for and against the usage of the N-word in theatre, she told The Daily.

Frazier led "difficult" but "productive" conversations with those involved with "Assassins" that included discussions of comfortability, personal experiences and the history all concerning the N-word, she added.

However, even as part of the production team, Frazier told The Daily she was “in the gray” on what the final decision would be. She found out with the rest of the crowd on opening night, at the 6:30 p.m. show on Friday.

“I don’t know, again, what decisions factored into what when it came to the use of the word,” Frazier said. “Even when I was sitting down in the seat, I was still wondering if any last minute changes were gonna happen.”

Ultimately, the two Friday shows included the use of the N-word.

Around 3 p.m. on Sunday, L&M released an official statement to its Instagram account regarding the slur’s usage. The statement said L&M “failed to engage in meaningful conversations with the Black community” regarding the use of the N-word and will develop strategies for “preventing harm in the future.”

“We are profoundly sorry for the harm we caused,” the statement read. “Art should never come at the expense of the safety of Black and POC communities. Because of our actions and inactions, it did.”

The “Assassins” director, producer nor the actor portraying Booth responded to The Daily’s requests for comment.

For Members Only and the Black Mentorship Program, two student groups providing support and community to Black students and working toward justice, posted a statement jointly to the two groups’ Instagram accounts Saturday.

“The choice to include such language reflects a failure to consider the lived experiences of Black students and perpetuates a culture where our concerns are dismissed in favor of artistic justification,” FMO and BMP said in the statement.

Weinberg sophomore and FMO’s Associated Student Government Senator Ay Taiwo said she wrote the statement with SESP junior and FMO co-Coordinator Riley Morris. Taiwo said that although she understands why the production may have wanted to include the word to demonstrate the character’s racist beliefs, the oppressive and hateful history of the word “trumps portraying that he’s racist.”

“There’s a lot of other ways that you can get that point across without using such a historically-tied word to the Black community,” Taiwo said.

Taiwo said she does not believe “Assassins” team members engaged in “any communication with any of the Black student groups” when deciding whether to use the N-word in the song and added that some student theatre artists encouraged “Assassins” team members earlier on in the process to find an alternative “more inclusive for everyone.”

At the time of publication, the L&M board and the “Assassins” director and producer had not responded to The Daily’s inquiry into whether members of the theatre community had asked “Assassins” to explore options not including the N-word.

Frazier told The Daily she thinks “the cast were put in a very difficult position” and feels that “the cast and the pit and crew are least to blame for this situation.” She added that she believes the conversations regarding minority representation in theatre spurred by “Assassins” are important to have, but wishes the “Assassins” criticism was accompanied by a recognition of the conversations that had occurred about the use of the N-word.

“I just wish that (the criticism of the show) had been done in a way that wasn’t so disregarding of the humanity and the things that went on behind the scenes that aren’t visible to the public, because, of course, these things go through layers and layers of edits and censorship and adjustments,” Frazier said.

Frazier still emphasized the hurt caused to those in the Black community, as “the history behind the word is indescribable.”

The “Assassins” production team cited copyright concerns as one of the main reasons for keeping the N-word in the song, Frazier said, adding that non-student advisors to both the Northwestern Student Theatre Coalition and L&M pushed for the N-word to remain in the show for these reasons.

Music Theatre International owns the rights to “Assassins” and does not permit any changes to the material unless the production company obtains approval from the licensing agency.

“I would like to say that there were alternatives proposed, multiple which involved substitution, audio manipulation and things like that,” Frazier said. “However, when these alterations were proposed, they were explicitly shut down by the advisors, saying that there would be severe legal implications.”

According to Frazier, MTI is known to watch NU’s shows to ensure productions maintain the integrity of their scripts.

Some weren’t convinced by this explanation. Communication junior and ASG Senator Ryan Lien was a rights representative for StuCo, a role in which he said he managed applications, contracts and payments to secure performance rights for all StuCo shows that required licensing. Lien said he believes the “Assassins” team could have found a solution to avoid saying the N-word in the show.

“I find it unlikely that MTI would not allow for the removal of that word, seeing as I have worked on shows in the past in which we have changed harmful or outdated language, officially with approval from MTI,” Lien said.

The L&M board and the “Assassins” director and producer had not replied to The Daily’s inquiry into whether they requested approval from MTI to omit the N-word by the time of this article’s publication.

Lien also posted a statement in his official capacity as an ASG senator to Instagram on Saturday, urging the theatre board to issue an apology and announcing his intentions to encourage ASG and the Student Activities Finance Committee to decrease L&M’s funding for the 2025-2026 school year if it does not address the harm done.

Bienen and McCormick junior and ASG co-President James La Fayette Jr. posted on his Instagram story Saturday to condemn the usage of the N-word in “Assassins.”

La Fayette Jr. said that hatred is on the rise in the current political climate. Those carrying out oppressive acts are “encouraged to continue their hatred towards minorities” because those in power are doing so as well. Therefore, it is important to raise one’s voice in the face of injustice, he said.

“Being silent about an issue like this is a form of being (complicit). If you choose not to care about it or not to say anything about it, that’s basically saying, ‘Yeah, this is okay. I’m not against this,’” La Fayette Jr. told The Daily. “I’m glad that a lot of students shared their opinions and that it spread around pretty quickly. Hopefully, that’s what pushed them to cancel it.”

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Curtain Call: Steppenwolf Theatre's 'Windfall' features NU professor, puts a price tag on grief

Ashley Dong, Assistant Visualizations Editor

Is \$1.5 million enough to recompense a grieving parent?

Steppenwolf Theatre Company's newest original play "Windfall" goes beyond answering this question — it forces the audience to confront the dilemma themselves through two impassioned acts that had this theatergoer leaning forward in her seat.

Set in Chicago and featuring an all-Black cast, "Windfall" explores the power of grassroots activism and the aftermath of police brutality.

When a police officer shoots a young, non-binary activist named Eli, their father Henri "Mr. Mano" Tamaño is confronted with the question of whether he should accept the police department's sizable cash settlement.

Written by Steppenwolf ensemble member and Oscar winner Tarell Alvin McCraney, the play premiered Sunday after two weeks of previews and will run through May 31.

Mr. Mano (Michael Potts) anchors the production with stubborn, fiery intensity. His soul-wrenching monologue about his struggle to appropriately support his child through their gender transition elicited deep hums of support from the crowd.

The play undulates between the real world and the imaginary: Mr. Mano frequently converses with the ghost of his adopted son, Marcus (Glenn Davis), who tries to convince him to take the settlement. Marcus often breaks the fourth wall, engaging with patrons and immersing them in the performance.

The play is intentionally interactive in a way that never feels disingenuous. In a pre-show sequence, Eli (Esco Jouléy) invites the entire audience to pull out their phone flashlights. This gesture reminded audience members of the power of community, visualized by the combined brightness of their lights.



Courtesy of Michael Brosilow

Eli (Esco Jouléy) addressed the audience directly, urging them to action.

With the play staged in the round, the six actors moved onstage and through the house fluidly; the lights rarely went into a full blackout. Hand-drawn signs reading “Keep your head up” or “Sí, se puede” hung around the space, emulating an encampment and bringing activism to the forefront of audience members’ minds.

Steppenwolf ensemble member and Northwestern Communication Prof. Alana Arenas shone in one of the most memorable tracks in the show, appearing in succession as three different characters — all of whom attempt to convince Mr. Mano to take the settlement. Arenas embodied each character with such skill that it felt like the part was written for her — which it may very well have been.

Arenas and playwright McCraney, along with Davis, are all former students of NU Communication Prof. Henry Godinez. They took Godinez’s Shakespeare acting class together at DePaul University over two decades ago.

Thus, the unique strengths of the entire Steppenwolf community were on full display in “Windfall.” Only a regional theater of Steppenwolf’s caliber that is deeply attuned to its community could produce a work so poignant and hard-hitting.

Live theater is a powerful medium because it puts actors face-to-face with their audience, and this play takes full advantage of the human connection that allows. I think I was the youngest person in Sunday’s audience, which is a shame because students have so much to gain from Chicago’s theatre scene.

Treat yourself to Steppenwolf’s \$15 student tickets, get on the CTA train and go see “Windfall.”

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