June 2022, Issue 15

Dallas YACS-A-LOT Newsletter

Happy June! Jamie Matthews is stepping in to write the opener this month because I'm busy moving. So, with very little introduction, here's Jamie.

Hey everyone! I was asked to step in for a regular opener, Sam, for this edition of the YACS-A-LOT newsletter. To be honest, I'm not quite sure where to start, so I guess I'll just introduce myself. Hi, my name is Jamie, I’m 21 (22 this month), and I have a tumor inside my spinal cord. For all my scientific fancy-pants friends, I have a pilocytic astrocytoma inside my spinal cord at T7-T8. I had a surgery in September to resect and get a biopsy of the tumor (nicknamed my jellybean) and another surgery in November from complications of the first surgery. (If my surgeon or oncologist is reading this, hi *waves*.)

I completed 25 sessions of radiation in March and my first post-radiation scan is one day away from when I am writing this. With this comes feelings of scanxiety and helplessness. Does anyone else feel like this? If we could control our tumors, what would we do? Would we shrink them? Get rid of them completely? Maybe stopping it from coming in the first place? Would we ever end up meeting our best friends that we met in our support groups? As much as I would like to think I would change my journey, I don’t know that I really would.

The first thing I did when we discovered my tumor in August 2021 was to see if anyone else on social media had a spinal cord tumor like mine. I found only one person, and they live in the UK. Unlike me, however, they were able to completely remove their tumor. Still, I
reached out, but to this day I haven’t heard back. I knew at that moment that I needed to make my own social media account intending to be the support I needed back then. Around this time, I was on a plane coming back from Colorado, sharing my story with a stranger. When they said, “Wow you have such a great outlook on this,” my sarcastic self replied, “Well, if I don’t have humor then I just have a tumor, and there’s no fun in that.” Thus @humorandatumor on Instagram was born.

Recently I reached 100 followers, and I had my first person reach out to me. Finally, I could support someone else in their journey. This person (whose permission I have to share this) reached out after seeing my Instagram on my bio from another month’s newsletter feature. They said that their son of a similar age to me was just diagnosed with the same tumor in their spinal cord. She mentioned how they aren’t quite ready for a full-on support group meeting but still want a little peer support. I felt a swell of empathy because just eight months ago I was in the same boat. I am so glad she reached out to me, and I was able to point her in the direction she might like to follow. She seemed almost as grateful to have reached out as I was that she did. This is what this newsletter is all for—allowing people to connect with others in different parts of their cancer journey. Sharing and reaching out to others is so scary and confusing, and finally connecting with someone is like finding a hand in the dark. Even though all of our journeys are unique, there is always someone to lend an ear, share some words, or even a shoulder to shed a few tears on during moments we all go through. I can’t wait to be that person for someone else the way this group has been for me. Here’s to passing on that torch.

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**DALLAS YACS CALENDAR**

June 9th, Thursday, 6pm - 7:30 pm — Equest

June 28th, Tuesday, 7:00 pm — June Virtual Support Group
IN MEMORIAM

Andrea Wendolyn Silos

The loss of Andrea hurts, as does every loss, but it's worth repeating in a cancer support group. While death is inevitable with our group, it does not soften the blow.

When COVID hit, the Dallas YACS group was struggling to maintain its presence virtually. We were coming up with all sorts of online events to see what would stick. Because to function, a support group needs people to actively participate.

During this time, Andrea was one of our biggest supporters and participants—she made everyone feel comfortable and validated.

We had a short-lived book group that I created as one of those events. We only read two books, but Andrea joined. And her love for the group members, books, and reading was abundant. Connecting to people like Andrea ensures that there are no failures when you're coming up with events on the fly.

Over the past couple of years, anytime she felt concerned for my safety or sympathized with something I was going through, she would
check in on me. Andrea was always open to sharing and being vulnerable within our group and a complete joy to be around.

Andrea was a warm and inviting light during the darkest and coldest times of COVID to us in Dallas YACS. And I’m sure to those she knew outside of our group, she was always checking on everyone's wellbeing, making sure that the quietest whisper was always heard.

We can always say the world gets darker when someone dies because the hurt will always be there. However, with Andrea, the echoes of light she provided will always remain. So, thank you, Andrea. We're going to miss you.

- Sam Snow

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**IN MEMORIAM**

**Ellis Emerson**

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Ellis Emerson, a self-chosen name because it means kindness, was my "melanoma buddy." Kindness is what Ellis wanted her legacy to be. She was kind, the type of kind I hope we all strive for.
Ellis championed equity for everyone. I could retell some hilarious stories she's told me that occurred during times when she felt she saw or experienced inequality, but I could never tell them the way Ellis did. We shared the same diagnosis and some of the same initial doctors. We both ran our way through treatment for Stage III Melanoma, although Ellis ran Badwater and I ran laps around local parks. That's the same, right?

Our commonalities didn’t end with Melanoma and running. We both love writing (Ellis is the person who kept on me about publishing my blog), cold drinks, and going on adventures. Ellis was good. She was pure. She was 100% herself all the time. She wrote a list of 10 things worse than dying - not really living was #1.

I've thought a lot about that since her death. I've thought about many things Ellis did and said. The impact she had on the world cannot be explained with words, which is unfortunate because words were one of her favorite things. I'm sad I never enjoyed a cold drink with Ellis in person, but I'm so happy to have known her.

Ellis was, in one word, ineffable.

- Dr. Samantha Dean

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**ALEX'S MEDITATION MOMENT**

June is National Cancer Survivors Month! Among all the things to celebrate this month, I want to pick out one that may not appear on your gratitude list – companioning fear. No, not sitting there as #1 one on your list?! I’ll try to explain why I want you to add it!

While no one is immune from the grip of fear, at the time of a tragedy like a cancer diagnosis, fear can cause us to feel isolated and to disconnect. We start to wonder why we were “chosen” for this tragedy or whether we did something wrong to bring it about. When we get enveloped in fear, we try tactics like out running, avoiding, or even out gunning it by reaching for anything that gives us a sense of
power or control. We are afraid to surrender to fear because it may mean losing more control and evoking more pain in the process. I’m betting you have come to know that you never had control to begin with, what you had was anxiety.

Throughout all stages of survivorship, your relationship with fear has changed. While fear is never an easy feeling to allow, we learn to engage with it because denying fear means denying all of the feelings that come in the package with it. If you are never fearful, you also have trouble feeling compassion, curiosity, or joy- the sources of connection and wholeness. Survivorship comes with the never-ending challenge of being willing to companion fear in order to step more fully into living. Participating at any level in this group means participating in the most basic human activity of giving and receiving help in the face of fear. We know fear will reappear- we expect, allow, observe, and attend to it – and we know we cannot just go it alone.

The below mindfulness practice invite us to build a space between fear and our knee-jerk reactions to it. In that spaciousness, we can find peace in the presence of fear by learning that you can feel fear without being afraid.

Begin by silently say to yourself, “I am afraid.”

Fully experience what it is like to say and feel “I am afraid.” Stay with this experience until you feel it completely.

Now, instead of saying, “I am afraid,” take a breath and say silently to yourself, “I feel fear.”

Notice the shift from “I am” to “I feel.” Experience this shift and the new relationship.

Now, shift again by saying silently to yourself, “I am aware of feeling fear.”

Experience awareness of feeling fear fully. Shift into an observing awareness. Notice the different emotional quality that comes from
shifting who or what fear is appearing to.

Now, let your awareness shift again as you say, “Fear is welcome.”

Starting from and as awareness, experience welcoming like a vast deep ocean of awareness welcoming the waves of fear.

Feel the awareness embody and embrace while remaining open. Notice the different emotional quality that comes from welcoming the aliveness as not separate from the ocean of awareness. Sense the support that welcoming brings.

Now say silently to yourself, “Awareness and fear are not separate.”

Pause and be curious. Notice if awareness is arising, in the sense of aliveness and feelings, without identifying or rejecting it. Feel the open-hearted awareness fully.

Feel the awareness, the energetic aliveness, the deep stillness of presence that feels connected to all other beings who feel fear and have the resource of awareness within.

Notice the feeling of looking out at others and the world from this embodied, connected, open-hearted awareness. Close the meditation by feeling a new motivation to reach out to connect to others in a compassionate expression.

We are here for you!

Help us recognize your milestones! Do you have an appointment, scan, or cancer-versary coming up? Let us know so we can send you a note of support! Just follow the link below.
JAMIE'S JOKE JOINT

In my neighborhood, there was a couple who had given their twin sons very weird names. One was named Trouble, while the other boy’s name was Mind Your Own Business.

So, one day they were playing hide and seek. Mind Your Business counted to a hundred and then started looking for his brother. But, somehow, he couldn’t find him anywhere.

He saw a police car passing the neighborhood, so he stopped it to ask for help. When the police officer asked him for his name, he replied, "Mind Your Own Business!" Feeling insulted, the police officer still asked politely who he was looking for.

Mind Your Own Business replied, "I am looking for Trouble!"

Michelle Hamilton's Recipe Respite

https://pinchofyum.com/20-minute-healthy-chicken-parmesan

It’s finally summer, which means... summer squash and zoodles! I love this recipe because it includes whole grains, whips up quickly and it is a guilt-free version of a childhood favorite of mine. Not a huge fan of zoodles or picky eaters at home? Try this recipe with ½ pasta (GF or whole wheat) and ½ zoodles. Dairy free? No problem! Skip the mozzarella and use a 1:1 ratio with the breadcrumbs and panko. Enjoy! 😊
PROMPT OF THE MONTH

You wake to find that you've gained a new sense. What is it and why do you think you've gained it?

If you'd like your response featured in next month's newsletter, simply include it in an email to the group's email, dallasyacs@gmail.com.

That's it! You've reached the end of our newsletter. Until next time...

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