This month we’re going to break the mold and not focus on cancer. Instead, we’re going to appreciate the reason we exist, the antithesis to cancer: Alexandra Huffman.

If you’re from outside this group, you may not know much about what Alex’s existence means to us, and that’s because Alex is extremely humble. So, we’re going to spend a bit telling you about what she’s done for us.

I cannot thank Alex enough for the role she's played since the recurrence of my cancer. Truly, there are few souls, if any, kinder and more proactively supportive than that of Alex. She was one of the first people I told when I saw the terrifying MRIs and she kept me from walking into a deep well of depression.

As my journey continues, I take so much comfort in knowing Alex is on my side—to me, she's like stepping into the sunlight and finding it to be the absolute perfect temperature for an ideal outdoor nap. I'm going to keep my writing brief this month and let the people I reached out to give their take on Alex.

Rachel Walker: “Alex is the godmother to Dallas YACS. She selflessly gives guidance and support to all the members. She’s created a strong community for survivors to create lasting bonds with one another. There would be no Dallas YACS without all the energy and effort that Alex continuously has given to make this program the success it is.”
Katy Yost: "Alex has been such a constant since my first meeting with DYACs. In the cancer world, having a 'landing pad' amongst the whirlwind of diagnosis, treatment, appointments, coping, grief, joys, etc., has been truly life-changing. She has taken the time to get to know me, extended kindness, resources, and her presence during so many moments for myself and so many of my fellow cancer patients over the last three years. Thank you, Alex, from the bottom of my heart for all that you have and continue to do for us."

Dr. Taylor Roth: "Navigating life as a young adult with cancer can be, to say the least, A LOT. I’m thankful to have Alex in my life as both an amazing social worker and friend. From my first group meeting 2+ years ago to now, she has always been there for me, whether it’s talking about acceptance or comparing notes on Dallas restaurants. I wish I’d never had to meet her, but I’m so glad I did!"

Hope Anderson: "In Season Six of Modern Family, Phil Dunphy (played by the lovable Ty Burrell) celebrates the graduation of his daughter with a musical number in her honor. Extolling his daughter’s brilliance and leadership, the ukulele song is appropriately titled, 'Go Ask Alex.' Phil strums along and rattles off a list of talents that their family genius, Alex Dunphy, performs on a daily basis. Although Alex will later go on to study biochemistry at Caltech, design robots, and conduct research in Antarctica, by the episode’s conclusion, the family reminds Alex that her greatest strength is not her brains, but instead, the deep capacity of her heart.

Phil’s 'Go Ask Alex!' song has long reminded me of our own Alex Huffman. At various stages of the pandemic, I would sometimes add verses of my own to Phil’s song:

'If you don’t know what a word means, go ask Alex! … Want more info on the vaccine? Go ask Alex!' (For the record, I do have a full-blown, multi-verse rendition available for our particular Alex, but I’m still waiting on someone in Dallas YACS to learn the ukulele.) In ways big and small, I knew that no matter how scary life got, there would be at least one 'grown-
up' out there who would answer my texts, get me the info I needed, and make me feel good that I’d even reached out to ask.

While *Modern Family* could have simply reduced Alex Dunphy to a brainiac character, that’s not the full story they choose to tell. Instead, by the series’ end, we see a sensitive protagonist who emerges as a defender of the vulnerable and who proves herself to be a kind, compassionate leader. You can’t help but think of our own Alex. Three years into my cancer journey, I remain profoundly grateful for a social worker who lets me cry honestly, allows me to steal candy from her office, reps my college sports team, and gives me the reassurance that I’m not on this journey alone.

So everyone, grab your ukuleles and sing it loud… ‘go ask Alex!’"

(Author's Note: If anyone knows how to play the ukulele, please contact me stat, and I'll contact Hope to try to and get a record of that full rendition.)

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Maritza Figy: "I see Alex as an angel on earth. She is so special, giving, passionate, and kind. She helped me so much through medical things and also checked up on me emotionally during a low point. Anyone who has been around Alex can feel her sweet energy and presence. I am so grateful for you Alex!!"

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Roberto Cowan: “What Alex has meant to the young adult community in Dallas has been immeasurable. When she called me in June of 2019 to ask about a young adult cancer support program, it changed my life. I didn’t know any other young adults with cancer, and I immediately met some. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that what started as a group would become a program, guided by Alex and the young adults that populated it. Without her support, this program would not exist, and the cancer community in DFW would not be the same.”

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I should note that these comments are only the ones for which I reached out individually. It wouldn't be fair if I didn't extend a communal invitation
to state how Alex has affected your life, so, without Alex's permission, here's her email to send a personal message to her: Alexandra.Huffman@UTSouthwestern.edu.

Thank you, Alex—you somehow move mountains with a smile. We're forever indebted.

**DALLAS YACS CALENDAR**

**Tuesday, October 25th, 7pm** - Virtual Support Group on Zoom

**Sunday, November 13th, 10am - 1pm** - Healthy Tailgate Favorites Cooking Class

**Thursday, November 17th, 6:30pm - 8pm** - Writing Workshop with Elephants and Tea, 6:30-8pm on Zoom

**Card Committee!**

Volunteer for the Card Committee! Once a month, this group will get together to write cards to young adult patients admitted to Clements hospital. This is a great way to extend our YACS community to patients during such a difficult time. Email Alex if interested.

**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.

Share your milestone!
IN MEMORIAM

Shannon Schnaible

Shannon passed on this past week. I didn't know her that well, but I was
friends with her on Facebook, so I'll say what I can because everyone deserves a proper farewell.

There are two words I'd use to describe Shannon from my brief interactions with her: community and family.

I met her at our first Equest event and learned that she came from a background I was familiar with: theatre, which is a vibrant and beautiful community. By looking through her photos, it seemed that theatre permeated her life. I did theatre through high school, and I know how it felt to live a separate character's life on stage—it's like multiplying your own life. There's a magic to the theatre and that magic glowed through Shannon.

And then there's family, and Shannon blended her love of theatre with the love of family. I won't try to try and explain this part of her life because I didn't know her well enough; however, you just need to look at the above pictures. She and her husband, Daniel, went on a trip to Disney World this past summer, and just look at that photo... all-encompassing love.

Thanks for spending some of your time with us, Shannon. We appreciated your presence and will miss it immensely.

Lastly, I will leave everyone with a link to a performance of her in the Batman stage-universe: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpx1RuP9emA&t=71s

Theatre and family. There's nothing like them.

Knowing The Group! Featuring George Castillo, Jr.
George was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, Diffuse, Large B-Cell on 3/6/2018. Here’s what he had to say on the diagnosis and the effect it had on him:

"It’s an aggressive terminal blood cancer. I was given three-six months to live and only a one percent survival rate. I was told to plan my funeral and the doctors would make the end as comfortable as possible. I told my oncology team that I serve a mighty God and I was going to be healed, so there was no need to plan a funeral. I’m a walking miracle and I thank Jesus every day for my healing.

"I used to love to cook and run, but unfortunately my blood cancer took that away from me. After going through aggressive chemo and an autologous stem cell transplant, my body doesn’t function as it used to.

My bones and muscles are in constant 24-hour pain that never seems to stop. I developed neuropathy, which means that sometimes I’ll have flare-ups and muscle spasms due to stress or being overworked. My constant pain took away my love in the kitchen and my morning runs.

"My terminal blood cancer allowed me to return back to church and receive my holy sacraments. It also allowed me to go on a missionary trip
to Columbia to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. I decided to take an early retirement and travel the world really not knowing how much time I have left in this temporary world.

"My life now revolves around my nieces and nephews (Naomi, 7; Gigi, 6; Nicholas, 5; Noel, 4; Zayzay, 2; and Jasmine, 2 months). I now wake up every morning thanking Jesus for my healing. I now take time to appreciate God's canvas in the sky and smell the flowers that are blooming. I no longer rush through life, but take the time to appreciate this temporary life. My terminal blood cancer has been a blessing. I remember when I heard that I had terminal blood cancer, I thanked God. People told my family that they thought I was crazy, but I told them Jesus loves me so much that he wants to see me a little sooner than expected. So, I look forward to going to heaven one day and spending eternity there."

I need more submissions!

If you'd like to be featured in a future newsletter—and let's face the facts, if you're reading this, we want to feature you—then send us an email through THIS LINK, bolded so you won't miss it.

As we receive your responses, they're added to our supply and we pull one per month for the newsletter.

Have Some Feedback?

If you have anything you'd like us to know that isn't covered in the survey or milestone link, tell us here.

ROBERTO'S JOKE CORNER
ALEX'S MEDITATION MOMENT

My niece is really into the Percy Jackson book series, and as her obsessed aunt, I had to read them too! In the second book, *The Sea of Monsters*, the main character, Percy, is able to communicate with his best friend and protector through an empathy link, which is described as a telepathic connection in which the two characters have the ability to sense where the other is and somewhat read their emotions. This sparked a great opportunity for me to ask my niece what empathy means. In her 12-year-old wisdom, she simply told me, “It’s when someone makes you feel like you aren’t alone.” This social worker’s heart just about exploded—she nailed it! She was able to put into a few words a feeling of connection framed in vulnerability.

When we were at the paddle boarding event this weekend, I heard a less fictional and just as powerful empathy link described as the feeling you have around those who “just get it.” Empathy creates a sacred space to connect—to feel seen, heard, and valued. What’s also amazing is that empathy is the direct antidote to shame. If we can surround each other with the love and belonging that empathy provides, shame can’t survive. When we tell our stories or share an experience with someone and they respond with empathy, most of our shame loses its power. Even more epic, we have mirror neurons that actually support these empathy links. They fire when we observe someone being touched, and we can sense what it is like to be touched or “feel felt.” Mirror neurons enable us to see each other as intentional beings with purpose and intention.

Our neurological wiring is a starting point for empathy, and we need much more than that. Empathy is not a default setting, and mindfulness can function as a kind of “empathy training.” Perspective-taking, empathic concern, and attunement are inherent in meditation and play critical roles in increasing empathy. *Tonglen* means “giving and taking,” and through this
practice, you use your breath to take, or inhale, the suffering of someone, and to give, or exhale, compassion and connection. If you find it difficult to breathe in a dark cloud, you might want to experiment with imagining a white or brightly colored cloud or as cool air instead.

To begin, find a comfortable position allowing you to feel relaxed yet alert. After taking a few cleansing breaths, follow your breath and settle the mind.

Next, bring to mind a person who is experiencing suffering, and imagine they are standing in front of you. Imagine their suffering as a dark cloud surrounds them.

As you inhale, imagine breathing in the dark cloud. As you breathe it in, the cloud transforms into a bright, warm light of compassion at your heart area.

When you exhale, you extend that light of empathetic connection to them, alleviating his suffering.

Continue breathing in the dark cloud of suffering, allowing the cloud to transform into warm, bright light, and directing your compassionate warmth to your loved one as you exhale.

When you are ready to return to the present moment, take a few deep, mindful breaths.

Have you figured out what animal the pirate preferred? ...An arrrrggghhh-hangatang!
PROMPT OF THE MONTH

Turns out we're the damsel in distress/sire in strife. What situation are you being saved from and what is your hero like?

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

That's it! You've reached the end of our newsletter. Until next time...
Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can update your preferences or unsubscribe from this list.