Our 2nd YACS Retreat Brought
"Fantastic Fun First Time"
by Veer Patel

I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared or nervous to attend the 2nd Annual Sam Snow YACS Retreat. Not only was it my first time attending a UTSW YACS event, but it was also my first time attending anything solo since becoming partially paralyzed on my right side following the resection of a synovial sarcoma from my neck/spine.

While I am a native DFW resident, the uncommonness of my diagnosis led me to completing my entire treatment (chemotherapy, proton therapy, and surgery) at MD Anderson. I greatly benefited from the AYA program they had in Houston, but I was completely unaware of any local support programs for young adults with cancer once I was back home in the Metroplex. Chance, however led me to connecting with Maritza Figy, who encouraged me to reach out to Alex Huffman, the program facilitator.

I was actually working with another foundation based out of California (Send It), which provides outdoor experiences for cancer survivors. They unfortunately were booked for 2024, but they highly suggested I join a local group. I asked if they knew any in DFW, and they knew just the person who would…Maritza.

After chatting with her and connecting with Alex, here I was few short weeks later packing and getting ready for a multi-day overnight retreat. I had so many thoughts and concerns running haywire in my mind. How was I going to get around? How would I carry/manage all my stuff with one functioning hand? What if I fell? Would I feel left out due to my disability? What if I didn’t bond with anyone? etc. Alex did a great job of reassuring me that there was nothing to worry about, that none of the YACS (yaks?) bite and would be
Once I was packed and ready to go, the first member I actually met in person ended up being Ramsey Breaux. Since I did not have a ride to Sky Ranch, he was kind enough to give me a ride. It was like a breath of fresh air, getting to chat with a fellow young adult survivor. Even though we had different diagnoses and experiences, there was still a sense of understanding and bonding that a lot of survivors struggle to have with non-survivors.

We arrived at Sky Ranch and were greeted by a gorgeous lake, friendly, helpful staff, and none other than Tia, the program therapy dog! After quickly dropping off our things to the boys’ cabin and carefully claiming our bunks for the weekend, we headed out in search of others who had beaten us there or were trickling in.

As I met and got to know everyone, I could slowly feel the fear, anxiety, and nervousness lift away. While I could not participate in some of the activities, never ever did I feel left out. There was always someone to cheer on, support, or hang with. The ranch had a variety of activities for individuals of all capabilities ranging from zip-lining, giant swings, tree-top obstacle courses, or waterslides/watersports for thrill seekers to less adrenaline pumping ones such as mini-golf, corn hole, hatchet throwing, or just laying by the many pools on-site.

I also got to know the other members during our various meals where we would crack jokes, suggest restaurants, and sharing stories. We spent our evenings by the fireside, roasting s’mores, telling each other riddles, and more. The last day was the most heartfelt and emotional ending with a session of music therapy. While I did not know or get to meet Sam, I could see what an impact he had on the group throughout the retreat, which was quite moving.

This retreat was just what I needed at this point in my recovery and cancer journey. Cancer and all that comes with it can be quite daunting and isolating at times. Even after being cleared and declared disease free it can be a struggle to relate to others who haven’t had to go through it especially as a young adult. All I can say is that I am extremely glad I pushed through my fear/anxiety and decided to join and attend. I highly recommend anyone else on the fence to do the same.

I had an amazing time just getting to know everyone. I can’t wait to see them again at future meetings and events, as well as meet the other members who did not attend.
“This weekend was good for the soul!”
by Lydia Neighbors

I am so glad I went out of my comfort zone and attended this event with the Dallas YACS group. It was nice to unwind and let loose for the weekend. I found it encouraging to spend time with other young adults who are in all stages of this cancer process and who can relate/understand the unique challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis. I’m looking forward to next year!
"A Gift to Getaway"
by Tim Girgis

Initially, I was a little nervous about going on this trip for some reason. Perhaps it was the nature of the group and my unease with the weight it carries, by nature, but it was quickly snuffed out as I began making new friends and discovering a familiar sense of being normal again. It truly was such a gift to get away for a weekend and to build some new friendships and to feel seen for a while. Thank you to all who contributed and made this possible for us.

Connecting with Nature
by Leticia Hernandez

The second annual Sam Snow YACS retreat was a lovely weekend filled with group and solo activities, reflection, and the opportunity to spend time outside and connect with nature. Not to be outdone, Mother Nature provided us
Pictured above are a couple photos of Sky Lake, the body of water that neighbors the 20+ cabins at Sky Ranch. These views were within walking distance from both the women's and men's cabins for the weekend!

Retreat Dog
by Tia

It was a lot of fun to watch everyone zipline and play laser tag, but I was most excited for the water sports and music therapy! I loved canoeing with Alex, especially since I didn't have to paddle, and Christina brought the coolest instrument to our music therapy session- put me right to sleep! Riding around in the golf cart with my friends was pretty great too. Speaking of friends, I'm grateful for all of the special people in this group who give me hugs and belly rubs and sometimes share their food. Being a retreat dog is a hard job, but some dog has to do it!
Partner & Spouse Survey

We developed a brief survey to learn more about how we can support your spouses and partners. Please share the above QR code.

Be Part of the YACS Directory

This is a completely voluntary survey to gather contact info to share with group members. You do not have to answer all questions, and can quit any time. We’d love to know you better!

https://forms.gle/n2e2qBnLpLFi3oew8

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I'm 32 and I'm Dying

I’ve fought cancer for 13 years, and hospice care is the option I’m choosing now

by Taylor Roth

Published in the Dallas Morning News on April 27, 2024
I am 32 years old, recently earned my doctoral degree, competed on Jeopardy! and have an encyclopedic knowledge of America’s Next Top Model. I love watching John Oliver on Mondays, and I love dancing. I’m also on hospice care.

After battling brain cancer for 13 years and seeing my ability to walk, speak and write reduced to nearly zero, it was time to change tactics. I have been fighting brain cancer since 2011, using radiation and chemotherapy as tools to keep the tumor from going crazy. I survived such flare-ups three times, but each “win” was ultimately unsatisfying, knowing that I would have to play the game again.

Maybe I would get better, but probably not. I can’t imagine living a life that is about defeating cancer and not living life itself. So when my body rapidly started deteriorating to the point that I could do little by myself, I made the choice to stop treatment. I have had numerous friends die from brain cancer, and I miss them dearly. Brain cancer is a brutal disease. The five-year survival rate for someone my age, according to the American Cancer Society, ranges from 22% to 92%, depending on the type of brain tumor.

I lived with cancer for more than those five years, for which I am grateful.
I tried virtually everything I could to improve my life, including physical, occupational, speech and recreational therapies. I have taken medicine, and I have had more MRI scans than I can count. But, for me, they ultimately haven’t worked. My ability to function has slipped almost each year, I know this disease will eventually take my life, and I am tired.

I’m tired of a life that gets more and more difficult for myself and for other people. I want rest, and after 13 years of battling and a body that’s giving out, I think it’s time for that.

To be clear, I’m not advocating for any form of suicide, and I’m not suggesting that people should retreat from their own medical battles. I have fought that fight and have so far survived. There just comes a time when your body can’t do any more and needs to stop. You simply are not able to take those steps any more or make one more hospital visit. After you have fought hard and given it all you have, at least for some people, it may be time to lay down your weapons and retreat.

More than 1.71 million people are enrolled in hospice care in the U.S. during a typical year. I’m probably one of the younger patients, but hospice is giving me the opportunity to rest and seek comfort after years of treatment.

I am a Christian, and the good Lord might call me home tomorrow, or I might cheat death for a while, like former President Jimmy Carter.

The point is that I am so glad I have a choice at this point in my cancer journey. I’ll get rest. My hope is that doctors will continue to point their patients to hospice at the appropriate time. After a long health battle, it’s important for patients to have their own opportunities for rest.

*Taylor passed away peacefully on April 19, 2024. Her celebration of life service was held in Plano on May 11th, 2024.*

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made in Taylor's memory to the Head for the Cure Foundation: [https://give.headforthecure.org/team/548932](https://give.headforthecure.org/team/548932)
Nathan's Comedic Turf

Why did the king go to the dentist?

Dallas YACS Calendar

Upcoming Events:

Sunday, June 23rd, 10am- Explore Impressionism at the Dallas Museum of Art. Join us for a private viewing of works in the Impressionist exhibit followed by a guided painting activity.

Tuesday, June 25th, 6pm- YACS Yoga at the Cancer Center
Tuesday, June 25th, 7pm- Support group meeting, offered virtually and in-person at the Cancer Center
Saturday, July 27th, 4-6pm- We will beat the heat with an afternoon playing arcade games at Cidercade Arlington.

RSVP for any of these events by emailing Alex at alexandra.huffman@utsouthwestern.edu.

Happiest birthday wishes to our YACS celebrating in June!
Valerie Cano, 6/2
Angela Agogo, 6/8
Kelsey Lofink, 6/13
Fernando Ibarra, 6/28

Alex's Meditation Moment

The first weekend in May, we held our annual retreat, now named the Sam Snow YACS Retreat. The agenda was packed with activities I think Sam would've loved- laser tag, nighttime ziplining, water sports, hatchet throwing, and a lovely session led by our music therapist. Throughout the weekend, we focused on connecting to our bodily energy.

When we go through events we identify as traumatic, moving our bodies gives us a way to complete the natural actions that trauma disrupted. By stopping this natural cycle of release, the energy becomes “stuck” - our bodies hold this energy until we can safely release it. Embodied activities allow us to start repairing the cycle incrementally and deepen our understanding of the mind/body connection. Through intentional movement, we begin to improve our ability to release and regulate emotions. We can better manage stress, heal from and navigate life transitions, and build resilience. We can also then better narrate what we need to when we need to- talking doesn’t always come first.

We can bring this practice to light by completing a cycle of breath- a simple and accessible experience. Before we begin, bring kind awareness to the topic of completeness or wholeness. How do your belly, chest, and head feel when you reflect on this topic? Do you come into the practice with positive or negative feelings about it?

Take a moment to allow your body to settle. Find a comfortable position that allows your spine to be long but with a natural curve in the low back. You can close your eyes or keep them open with a soft gaze downward with your feet in front of you, let the belly and the shoulders relax.

Take a full breath in (2 seconds) and a long breath out (2 seconds). Now allow the breath to find its natural rhythm. In and out (5 seconds). First, notice when the inhale begins, how it continues, and when it ends (2 seconds). Then, notice when the exhale begins, how it continues, when it ends, and whether there is a brief pause before the inhale begins again (5}
On the next inhale and exhale, use your full attention to follow one complete cycle of breath completing this practice (3 seconds).

Joke Answer

He needed a crown!

Sam's Writing Prompt

Reflecting on Change and Growth Post-Diagnosis

Reflect on who you were before your cancer diagnosis and how the diagnosis changed your perspective on life. Consider the strengths and qualities that have helped you navigate your journey. Now, envision your future five years from now and describe what it looks like. What steps can you take now to bridge the gap between your present self and this future vision? Finally, think about any fears or doubts holding you back and how you can begin to release them.

Feel free to write this in any form that feels good to you. It can be brainstorming, an essay, poetry, etc. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or how you sound. Focus on how it feels to release these thoughts onto your paper.

If you'd like a past response to be featured in next month's newsletter, simply include it in an email to the group at dallasyacsalot@gmail.com.

Cooking with Chris!
Happy June, Y'all! Hope you guys are keeping cool at the pool or with a margarita this month. This month, I'm featuring a classic salad, the Caprese. It's an Italian salad with heirloom tomatoes, sliced mozzarella, basil, and balsamic vinegar. You can use whatever kind of tomatoes you have- cherry, Roma, green, yellow. You want your salad to have color!

Ingredients: Balsamic vinegar
Brown sugar
Sliced mozzarella
Basil, fresh or dried
Sliced tomatoes

Directions:
Arrange the tomato and mozzarella slices on a serving plate. Keep in the fridge.

Make the Balsamic Glaze:
Add 1 cup of water to a saucepan and bring to a boil. Once water has reduced to almost half a cup, add 8 ounces of balsamic vinegar. Reduce to med-low heat.
Once balsamic is boiling, add 1 cup of brown sugar, and slowly stir. This will make the balsamic reduction have a thick viscosity.
Let boil for about 15 minutes and check with a spoon. If the back of the spoon coats quickly and beads off, your balsamic is not thick enough and needs more time.
Check every 15 minutes, and stir slowly until you see that thick, delicious balsamic glaze.
Once you see your glaze thicken up, set aside to cool.

Grab your basil leaves. Roll and slice them into a chiffonade cut (fancy French word for thin slices into strips). If you don't have fresh basil leaves, dry basil will work just fine.
Grab your tray of tomato and mozzarella slices from the fridge. Generously salt and sprinkle the basil.
Next, drizzle that thick balsamic glaze all over.

Enjoy with a cold Peroni or Limoncello if you'd like!
Feedback?

If you have anything you’d like us to know that isn't covered in the newsletter, tell us [here].

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