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Embracing the Dance

How Alicia Graf Mack learned to live her dream in spite of spondyloarthritis

BY AMY VERGIN

Alicia Graf Mack grew up with a passion for ballet. It led her to an opportunity with the Dance Theatre of Harlem when she was just 17. After three good years there, Alicia began experiencing inflammation in her knee and ankle. She had surgery to repair a cartilage tear but the inflammation symptoms persisted.

Alicia gave her blood work to her cousin, Jonathan Graf, MD, a rheumatology specialist. Then the diagnosis came back: undifferentiated spondyloarthritis, a type

of arthritis that attacks the areas where ligaments and tendons attach to bones. The inflammation results in pain and stiffness—for a dancer, that could end a career.

By the time she received the diagnosis and was given medication, Alicia needed another surgery on her knee and foot to fix the issues that had developed. “I was 21 years old and had been fighting to get back to dancing for about a year. I decided that the fight wasn’t worth it anymore. I left dancing altogether and was working on making a transition ... I felt like I had failed in some way.”

She chose to study history at Columbia University in hopes of finding a new way of life. After graduating in three years, her medication started to kick in and she finished her physical therapy. Alicia started dancing a little with a praise dance ministry on campus (a way to minister to people through dance instead of music). The group was perfect for her because it allowed her to dance without much use of her legs. This was one of her turning points. “I think that’s what really brought me back to the love of dancing, because I have always believed that dancing is a calling ... it is sort of a spiritual or religious engagement, for me anyway.”

At that point, Alicia decided to take modern dance classes. Her instructor was Milton Myers, the resident teacher for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. “When he saw me, he said ‘I really think you should consider a career in dance.’” The world of dance is a small one—things snowballed. Myers convinced her to meet Judith Jameson and audition with the school. She didn’t make the cut, but still decided to dance for a small company called Complexions over the summer instead of taking a full-time position with JP Morgan.

A year later she got into Alvin Ailey, but the swelling and pain came back in full force. This time, however, she also developed uveitis: arthritis of the eye. She decided to stop once again.

Alicia moved to St. Louis, got married, and received a master’s from Washington University in nonprofit management. She found an alternative medicine doctor and loved his beliefs about using both Eastern and Western medicine. After thorough testing he advised her to part ways with gluten and dairy. “Within the first two months I felt a world of difference. I felt good in my body for the first time, like there was an ease in my joints that I had never experienced,” she said. “Within the first six months I was able to start to taper down the dosage of my medication. That was my first real awakening to the power of nutrition.”

Finally, Alvin Ailey contacted her for an alumni performance in honor of Judith Jamison’s last dance. When she walked out on stage, she knew this

was home. “It was another opportunity to say this is my time to live the dream again. So I moved back to New York and started dance again. And here I am three years later, still dancing.”

Her arthritis is in a period of remission, although flare-ups can still occur from sickness or if she stops medication. Alicia continues to be smart about how she treats her body by sticking to a healthy diet and actively resting. “If [changing your diet] keeps you doing what you love, that’s the biggest benefit of all.”