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A light in the dark

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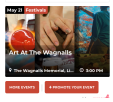

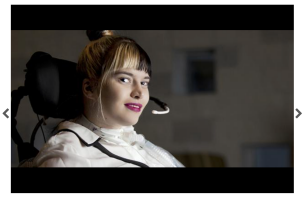

- Photos by Meghan Ralston and provided by Alix Reese

By Jackie Murray, Columbus Alive
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After a stray bullet paralyzed her, Alexandria Reese has moved plenty of things. People, mostly.

As Alexandria Reese lay dying, there was no light for her to follow.

Instead she watched a vision of herself get up from the hospital bed where she was experiencing another bout of cardiac arrest. She watched herself put one foot in front of the other until she reached the hospital bathroom. She watched herself look in the mirror.

Blood. Everywhere. Blood.

She reached for her neck, where the wound streamed red life. It was the last time she'd see herself touch something.

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Alix is a quadriplegic who has no motor control below her neck. She lives in a Northeast Side care center called Villa Angela; the average patient is much older than the spirited Alix, who spends most of her days in the center's area room watching TV, meeting with the many family and friends who visit her or obsessing over "The Walking Dead" (or anything Norman Reedus related). A couple years ago a friend bought her a tablet that she can use with a mouthpiece.

"I'm angry at the person who shot me," Alix says. "But I don't think about it. I can't think about it."

The afternoon of the day Alix was shot (May 27, 2010), Columbus State had accepted her to its early education program. The 23-year-old celebrated with some friends that night. They listened to a band at Carabar and ate Jeni's in the Short North.

Her friend asked Alix to drive her to her boyfriend's apartment near both Beulen and Whitehall, a path that took them to Atcheson and Trevitt streets.

It is here that Alix met a cruel fate. Her car drove between a gang fight. Six rounds entered her car and one cut through her neck and nearly hit her friend.

How you can help

If you wish to donate money to help Alix's cause or raise money to increase the $2,000 reward for any information leading to an arrest of who shot her, please visit the PayPal link on the website PrayersForAlex.com. More information can also be found at the Central Ohio Crime Stoppers link to her story. crimestime.org/alexandria-reese-shooting-on-atcheson-and-trevitt

The next few years for Alix were full of pain - physical, et al - and horribly ironic dichotomies.

The moment something good would happen, like an unprecedented 180 friends visiting her in Grant the first three days after the shooting, something bad would happen, like getting infections from the germs accidentally brought to her room.

The moment Alix feels a physical sensation, it usually is one that hurts.

The moment Alix became required to rely on other people for anything physical was the same moment she became required to rely on herself to endure mentally.

She said goodbye to her boyfriend.

"I had to let him go," she says.

She forgave her friend whom she was driving that night.

"I told her it wasn't her fault," Alix says. "I'm from Powell. You're from Dublin. How were we supposed to know?"

The crime is still unsolved. Waiting for an answer to who shot her has become another thing in a long line of things Alix now airs for. She is at the mercy of a lot of factors. For instance, a fundraiser was tentatively planned for this past fall but it's been delayed as those involved work to figure out how to plan it and get transportation for her.

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Alix was one of those quiet kids who read Edgar Allan Poe in her closet at night. The kind who is misunderstood in high school but then blossoms into a creative young adult.

"I always waited for her to become a once," laughed Alix's aunt, Brenda Reese. "She never seemed to wake up to how attractive she was. She was more of an internal person. I think she views the world differently than most of us. She's always been this way."

Alix's mom, Nancy Cox, recalls her independent middle child had the kindest heart. Young Alix was willing to help everything - including dehydrated worms, which she once tried to pour water on to save - which belied her toughness.

"When we asked the doctor right after the shooting what we had to do next," Nancy recalled, "he said he didn't know. No one has ever survived a wound like this."

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Not only did Alix survive, she beat many odds. They thought she might never talk again. She does. They thought she'd never be able to move her neck. She can; sometimes she even shrugs her shoulders (usually when getting fake-sassy with the Villa Angela nursing staff, who love her).

"I'm way cooler than you," she jokes with one nurse. "I'm like a robot."

Recovery progressed but has inevitably stalled. Getting on with life is not without many challenges.

"I've learned who my real friends are," Alix says.

One of them is Shawnte Huston, who met Alix when they worked together at Forever 21. One of the first times she hung out with her outside of work was at Comfest. She remembers eating a funnel cake with Alix.

"Alix had gotten powdered sugar everywhere," Huston recalls. "She was a mess and she was beautiful. ... It still breaks my heart that something so terrible can happen to such an amazing person, but she is still my best friend. She is still here and we gossip and talk about our favorite shows and the latest trends. She is still Alix. I wish everyone would remember that."

Alix knows it's hard for some people to talk to her - she is a flesh and blood (and, she'll tell you, machine) reminder of mortality and of life's uncertainties. She knows many friends have trouble talking to her about their problems because those problems don't compare to hers. She knows many friends can't relate to her anymore. That doesn't really make it easier.

But Alix has made new friends, too.

"I loved her before I met her," says Kat Marie Moya, a local fine and tattoo artist who recently met Alix and is working on a piece for her, a phoenix with bullet wings.

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For every bad she has faced, there is a good Alix clings to.

Like Calvin Giles.

Giles and his young family had recently moved to Atcheson Street in 2010. The night of the shooting, he heard gunshots and saw Alix's car run into another car. He ran out of his house and helped her calm down and put pressure on her neck until paramedics arrived.

"The night of the shooting still seems like yesterday," Giles said. "I really don't know what compelled me. All I know is that I knew she was injured and I wanted to help if I could. I didn't think about the gun fight or if she was the intended target, male or female, white, black, Asian or whatever. Nothing crossed my mind but the person in that car is shot and they may need my help. Now I think about if she was the intended target and they wanted to finish her off, I would have been in the middle. But that wasn't the case and she is alive."

Alix's family has tried to raise money to reward Giles for his bravery, but they run into snags everywhere; a recurring theme in the saga of getting justice for Alix or a sense of peace to her heartsick family.

A recognized hero award through the city, for example, that the family tried to get for Giles is only for first responders or firefighters, Cox said.

They've also asked the city, Oprah and Dr. Phil for awareness of Alix or a financial sponsor - something that might help remove her from Medicaid, which provides enough to keep her alive, and into a place where her quality of life would be better (like OSU's Creative Living facility).

"It's infuriating," Cox said. "But then I'm like, 'I can't get angry at these people. I can't ask them to pay for my daughter.'"

Or can she? Financial care is just one of the many gray areas those who love Alix struggle with.

One thing, though, is resoundingly clear.

"She is my hero," Giles said. "She has been through so much at a young age with her health, losing friends, being confined to a wheelchair and whatever else she endures inside that she doesn't share with anyone, she still finds happiness, smiles, laughs, has hopes, ambitions of teaching and living."

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For so many, Alix is a light in the darkness.

Perhaps that is why, when her heart nearly stopped and her life lingered somewhere gray, she saw herself.

She is the light she, and so many others, followed.

Photos by Meghan Ralston and provided by Alix Reese