

Lee Alexander Roos Clarke (12/17/89 - 5/11/15)

[read at Celebration of Alex's life, 5/17/15]

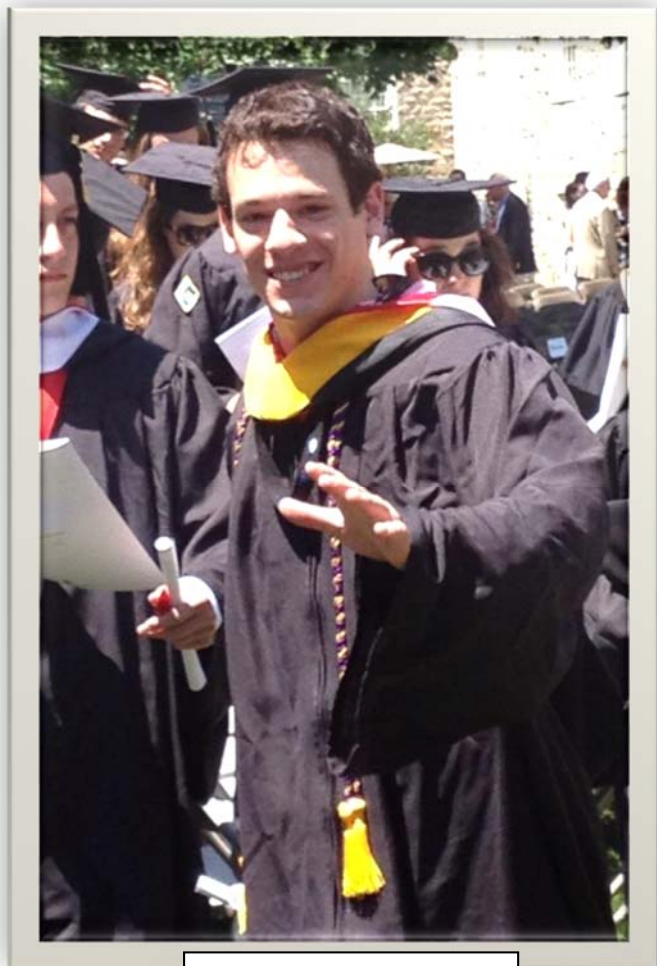


Photo credit: Hal Clarke

Our family knows grief. We know to put one foot in front of the other, and keep moving forward. We did it for Kathy, we did it for Granny, and we did it for Hal. I thought I knew grief, but this is a new kind of grief, raw, screaming, overwhelming grief. My neighbor Dori and I used to trade gruesome stories about the horrible things that happened to children, mostly things we read in the newspaper. I think it was kind of a naïve hope that if we talked about it, if we learned from it, bad things wouldn't happen to our families, to our children. But we have to reckon with the real world here, and bad things happen to good people.

And Alex was a very good person, a "good kid." He was movie-star good looking, smart, and wickedly funny. Definitely takes after his father in that regard, no one describes me as funny. I am still in awe of the eulogy he gave for his Aunt Kathy when he was 14. He wrote it because of his love for Kathy. He was an excellent athlete, excelling in baseball in high school and earning a black belt in karate. He was kind, and generous to those he loved, and he loved fiercely and was fiercely loyal. Among those he loved were Hunter and Ginny. He was a bit peeved that his "only child" status was threatened when Hunter and Ginny came to live with us. Frankly it was funny to see Alex and Hunter's attempts at one-upmanship: "you gave Alex this!" or "you never let me do those things, when I was Hunter's age!" They became like brothers, squabbles and all.

Here is what Hunter remembers: "He was my friend, my role model, and my brother. I always looked up to him and aspired to be as outgoing and intelligent as he was and I still do. My favorite memories growing up were being around Alex, Ellis, Joe and Mark and even though I was five years younger, Alex would include me, somehow finding the perfect balance between little brother and best friend. I'll always be grateful for everything he taught me and everything he did for me and my sister. No one will ever come close to having the same impact on my life that Alex did and because of that I'll miss him forever." For her part, Ginny remembers how kind Alex was: "I could have been that annoying younger cousin, but he helped me with my math homework, came into my room to chat, and played video games. He was a brother to me."

But Alex also had his demons. He had an eating disorder that almost killed him when he was 12. After being hospitalized, he fought back with the help of our dog Lexi, good doctors, and his Wardlaw friends to mostly recover. But significant anxiety and panic attacks remained with him for the rest of his life, fueling self-medication through drinking, drugs, and a resurgent eating disorder. These got particularly bad in the last few years of his life. He was searching for something to fill the void. But drinking and drugs did the opposite, they drove away his friends, the friends who loved him so much. Alex had to deal with much grief in his short life: when Lexi died, followed by Granny, followed shortly by Hal, he had a hard time coping. It was all the more difficult that their deaths occurred as his career plans fell through, and he didn't have a fully realized Plan B. He knew he could do science, he knew how to study—he was an A- student in biology and computer science at Dickinson College after all. And it was all the more difficult when he could see his friends moving ahead with their lives. He felt left behind and overwhelmed by life.

I need to be honest about Alex's addictions. The first thing we need to do is break down the stigma of drug abuse. This is happening to your friends, to your friends' families, even if people don't like to talk about it. It's happening right here in Metuchen, and in your towns. Once you do start talking about it, you hear the stories of friends or family members suffering the insanity that is drug abuse. In addition to breaking down the stigma, we need to better understand that addiction is a disease, a devastating and horrendous disease that physically changes one's brain chemistry. It's not simply a matter of personal choice, and especially not once addiction has a stranglehold over your life. People struggling to understand how this happened to Alex want to be able to blame someone or something. They are looking for rational explanations when there are none. The Naranon Family Group describes it in this way: "We have learned that addiction is an illness. It is a physical, mental, and spiritual disease that affects every area of life. It can be arrested but never cured. We have found that compulsive use of drugs does not indicate a lack of affection for the family. It is not a matter of love, but of illness. The addicts' inability to control [his] use of drugs is a symptom of the disease of addiction. Even when they know what will happen when they take the first drink, pill or fix, they will do so. This is the "insanity" we speak of in regard to this disease. . ."

To you young people: if you have friends with mental health or drug issues, tell their families. Once we learned from a few of Alex's friends that his drug use had escalated in especially destructive ways, we began a years-long struggle to help him. We and he worked so hard over so many years, but ultimately he was unable to climb high enough to reach sustained recovery. I am in awe of those who are in recovery for years, because I now realize how difficult their battles are. It used to seem easy--just make the right life choices, find God--but such attitudes are not in touch with the realities and challenges of mental health and drug addiction. I fervently hope that you won't have to go down the long road we have traveled with your loved ones, but I know some of you already have, and more of you will. Find support right away.

One reason I want to be open and honest about Alex's struggles is to find a way in which his life can continue to have meaning, for me and for those who suffer from this disease. If I can be part of a larger movement, I want to do that. If I can help people better understand the difficulties and challenges our young people face, I want to do that. Otherwise, too many more of our loved ones will die. ***Yes, it happens to people who look like us, and yes it happens to people who come from good families like ours. It can happen to anyone. Let me repeat: Yes, it happens to people who look like us, and yes it happens to people who come from good families like ours. It can happen to anyone.***

What I do know is that we could not have walked down this long road, and dealt with the grief we have faced, and are facing, without so many of you. As academics, of course, we now have a shelf full of books about addiction. That helps. But what really helps are our families and communities. This last week has been a blur, but we wouldn't have survived without our Metuchen and Sociology communities. I've learned from our years of grief how to ask for and accept help. Those of you who know me well know how hard that is for me. I want to mention each and every one of you by name, but it would simply take me too long. Thanks to Chip's and my families, especially Poo who did so much for Alex. My local Metuchen friends are always there for us, and have been with us since hour 1. And our Sociology colleagues readily stepped up to the plate, completing my grading for the semester and giving Chip's final exam. My students are likely happier, since they gave somewhat more A's and B's than I would have. Other colleagues, members of my book club, and other locals showed up with food and companionship, and organized so much for us. A number of Alex's buddies stopped by to offer their support, and many more have called and written. We heard from so many others by phone, by email, and by text. And I received much support from the Saturday night Naranon Serenity Group; you were always collectively and individually supportive, and I am thankful. As you know more than anyone, this is the outcome that terrorizes us more than any other. As I begin to pick up the pieces of my shattered life, I'm sure I'll learn more about other acts of kindness or support. To all, I thank you.

In closing, I want to highlight some excerpts from the comments Alex's friends or teachers made to us in the past few days. I chose just a few, to represent the different parts of Alex's life.

Sangya Varma, Adviser for the Rutgers Business & Science Program: "I spoke with Alex several times recently and helped him with the readmission process. He was so excited about coming back and finishing up the course work. . . . He told me that he was looking forward to coming back to NJ. He sounded so positive and hopeful."

Adam Bergo, Wardlaw friend: "I met you when I was 7 yrs old in the 2nd grade at Wardlaw Hartridge... I will never forget those times.....You and your family helped me out in many ways back then and [then] again . . . when I took your dad's class at Rutgers. I'll always be embarrassed of the time your dad put up a slide in the middle of Sociology 101 of you and I in the 2nd grade acting like fools."

Latisha DeVenuto, Wardlaw friend: "Clarke; You were a fun guy, a great friend to many, smart, talented and you always knew how to make someone smile! My fondest memories of you were from senior year of HS and your amazing dance moves in the senior lounge! . . . To quote Maya Angelou, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." You made those around [you] feel wonderful, important and appreciated! Not to mention you were SO funny and laughter helps us along so much in this life!"

Amy Johnson, Dickinson friend: "You were one of my closest friends and we shared so much together. I remember once Lexi ate your retainer and at first we thought it was funny until we realized that it was actually extremely expensive. Senior year, we told the school that I was your roommate (living on campus) so you could have a gigantic double to yourself while I lived off campus. . . . I shared every detail of my life with you and you were always there to listen and give advice, but never once did you judge me. . . . My favorite memories are from us going skeet shooting together. . . . you never put me down and always encouraged me to be better - until I got as good as you then it turned into a weekly competition. . . Love you always Clarke."

Tim Brown, Dickinson roommate: "From the first time I met you freshman year of college I knew it was the start of something amazing. The charisma, the energy, the style, and the overall manner with which you went about your everyday life was something I envied and tried to incorporate into my own life. We laughed, we fought, we cried, we went on adventures, we learned, and no matter what it was, we were always up for everything if we got to do it together. . . . Living with you were two of the best years of my life . . . and man did we make them count. You taught me confidence and you were always there for me when I needed you. You were much more than just a roommate, partner in crime, and best friend. You were a brother to me..... I will never forget the way you could always light up a room simply by walking in and busting out one of your classic Clarke phrases. From sharing clothes to sharing time together, I spent more time with you than anyone else those four years at Dickinson and after and I would never have it any other way. I am never going to forget how you helped me become the person I am today. . . . I will always love you Alex Clarke. "

To all of Alex's young friends, I implore you: have no regrets, celebrate the joy and laughter Alex had back in those days. Keep a piece of him in your soul as you journey through your life. He would have liked that. And keep in touch, I want you to have a life well lived.

I've gone on too long, so to Alex, as I kissed you good night and read you stories as a child, I would hesitate at your door and say "remote hug." Then later, when we were separated and talking on the phone, we would say "remote hug" as a ritual of our love. I hope you continue to feel my "remote hugs" envelop you, now and forever.

Please donate to Rutgers University Alcohol and Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), so that others suffering in recovery might live again:

Lisa Laitman, Director
ADAP Recovery Program
Rutgers University
17 Senior St.
New Brunswick, NJ 08901

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/education/edlife/a-bridge-to-recovery-on-campus.html>