HOW ALISSA'S JOURNEY LED HER HERE:

It is remarkable how time changes the way you look at things. There was a period when I could never have imagined being where I am today. It was a time so dark and scary that it felt as though it would swallow me whole—paralyzing me with fear in a way only one's threatened life could.

I was diagnosed in my early twenties with what is known as "agitated depression"—a combination of anxiety and depression. During that time, I was exhausted yet unable to sleep. I spent countless nights crying on the phone to my mother at 3 AM, terrified of what the future held. My obsessive thoughts revolved around my health, and each night I would mentally map out the nearest hospital "just in case" to ease my overwhelming anxiety enough to fall asleep. Living with Gaucher's Disease felt like an unmanageable burden. I was only seven years old when doctors first discovered unexplained bruising and an enlarged spleen. My parents were devastated as they were told of the potential challenges—a shortened life expectancy and no known cure or treatment. At the tender age of nine, I was diagnosed with Gaucher's Disease, which affects the spleen, liver, and bones. My platelet counts were dangerously low, and fatigue, bruising, and recurring infections became constant companions.

Much of my childhood was spent within the walls of Schneider Children's Hospital in New York. Surrounded by children battling life-threatening illnesses, I often wondered why I was fortunate enough to be able to leave the hospital most of the time while so many others were not. The hospital became a second home, filled with both compassion and trauma. I endured many invasive procedures, an ongoing battery of tests, and countless blood draws—once as many as 26 vials in a single sitting. The spinal taps remain some of my most traumatic memories. At 17, I became critically ill, culminating in the removal of my spleen, which had swollen to an astonishing 15 pounds—a medical anomaly at the time.

The night before that surgery was a defining moment in my life. Lying in that hospital bed, arms covered in broken blood vessels, I was terrified. Yet, in that fear, I felt a "knowing" inside me. Only years later did I understand that it was my soul that spoke to me that night. It became clear that while I could not control my disease, I could control my mindset and trust that somehow all would be ok no matter what the outcome. It was a true surrender for me and this realization became the driving force behind my decision to face not only the illness but also the fear it bred. I began to understand that our beliefs and attitudes shape our experiences and that the mind is our most powerful tool for healing.

At 24, I experienced my first full-blown anxiety attack—a terrifying cascade of chest palpitations, a sense of impending doom, and the fear of losing control. These attacks became a regular occurrence for more than two years. To cope, I turned to anti-anxiety medication and a weekly meditation group. Through these practices, I discovered the grounding power of breath and presence. These tools allowed me to manage my anxiety and continue pursuing my education.

By this time, I had been receiving bi-weekly enzyme replacement therapy, a revolutionary treatment for Gaucher's Disease. I was fortunate to be among the first 40 people in the United

States to receive this life-saving intervention. While it was challenging to accept the reality of lifelong IV treatments, I was deeply grateful for the opportunity to reclaim my health.
Despite this medical breakthrough, the psychological weight of living with a chronic illness lingered. I feared that my condition would prevent me from finding love and building a future. The prospect of revealing my "deep, dark secret" to a potential partner was paralyzing. These fears took years to confront and overcome.

For years, I felt isolated—convinced that no one could truly understand my experience. However, when I shifted my perspective, everything changed. I came to view my illness not as a curse but as a gift. It grounded me and instilled in me a profound appreciation for life. While my peers indulged in the illusion of invincibility, I knew firsthand how fragile life could be. This awareness led me to adopt the motto *Carpe Diem* (Seize the Day), a philosophy that has guided me ever since.

By definition, depression is "a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. It affects how you feel, think, and behave and can lead to various emotional and physical problems." It is more than just fleeting sadness or a temporary struggle. It is not a weakness, nor is it something one can simply "snap out" of. However, I genuinely believe that, with the right mindset and tools, it is possible to manage and even transcend these challenges.
I stayed strong for my family, especially my parents, who bore the weight of constant worry. I felt deeply for my brother, who often seemed to be overshadowed by my medical needs. But strength was the only option I knew. Children are remarkably adaptive, and I learned to endure the trauma without fully processing its emotional impact. It was only years later, through my work as a psychotherapist, that I recognized the profound psychological toll these experiences had taken on me.

In 1998, another health crisis struck. I lost the ability to use my legs temporarily and was misdiagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). This devastating diagnosis pushed me to my emotional breaking point. I felt trapped in an unending cycle of illness and fear. It was not until several years later that an astute neurologist revised my diagnosis to Basilar Migraines—a condition that mimics MS symptoms but is far less severe. This revelation lifted an enormous burden from my shoulders.

The turning point came when I realized that while I could not control my circumstances, I could choose my response. Viktor Frankl once said, "The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." This truth became my anchor. I began to focus on the power of positive thought and the importance of nurturing my mind and spirit alongside my physical health.

I came to understand that stress and suppressed emotions could exacerbate physical symptoms. By acknowledging and addressing my emotional pain, I sent a powerful message to my body: *Living can be difficult, but it is worth it.* I began to integrate mindfulness practices into my life, recognizing that while these methods might not cure my illness, they could profoundly enhance my ability to cope with it as well as improve its symptoms and side effects.

This integrative and holistic approach to healing is what inspired me to create a space where others could find the same solace and empowerment as I have. Alongside two like-minded amazing partners, we birthed *The Holistic Center for Soulful Living*—a sanctuary where the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of healing converge. This center is the manifestation of my deepest desire to bridge the gap between conventional western medicine and eastern philosophy and healing practices.

Years earlier, during my darkest days, a poem hung beside my bed as my beacon of hope. part of it read:

"Have you known despair and dared to step fully into your chamber of darkness, transforming your terror into that of a trusted friend? Then join me on a path of wonder, and I'll meet you in a field of infinite possibilities."

Today, those words continue to guide my journey—and the center's mission! A journey to bring healing awareness, resilience, purpose and hope to whoever finds their way to us.

This truly is one of the greatest honors of my life!

With gratitude & love, Alissa