I am not a traditional student by any means. I have been blessed to have wonderful life experiences and the opportunity to pursue multiple dreams. As I continue to grow and change, the way I pursue my purpose changes but my purpose, that of helping others live healthy lives, never wavers.

I graduated from TAMU with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a minor in Dance almost 15 years ago and returned to pursue my PhD in Health Education in 2018. Between that time, I studied dance at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio where I earned an MFA in Contemporary Dance in 2011. Through my dance studies, I learned the importance of movement and the arts to mental and physical health. I continue to share this knowledge today. I also discovered a deeply rooted passion to teach and connect with people.

During my MFA program I got married and my husband joined the Air Force. I had a wonderful career in the dance world and cherish all the amazing experiences of that time. At our first duty station I became a Key Spouse (Key Spouses are commander-appointed and serve as a resource to command teams in an effort to increase resiliency and unit cohesion amongst military members and their families throughout the military life cycle) to aid in support of our military families and have continued to grow in my volunteer endeavors. Currently my husband is still Active Duty and I serve with him as he fulfills his mission and obligations to our country.

Being a military spouse and volunteering opened my eyes to some of the health-related challenges this community faces, particularly related to social and mental health. After our children were born, I decided I wanted to pursue more education in a health-related field to better serve the military-affiliated population and I began looking at options to make the shift. I am now pursuing a PhD in Health Education, a graduate certificate in Health Coaching, and simultaneously an MPH in Epidemiology.

My previous and current activities related to health education and promotion are quite varied. I volunteer in multiple capacities, I have formally taught in various settings, I engage in professional certification, and I employ grassroots efforts to reach out to people and be available as a trusted source of information and support.

I am currently volunteering as the co-program director of BOUNCE which is a resiliency training program for military youth. Military youth face the same challenges as civilian youth but additionally struggle with aspects of military life such as frequent relocation, long periods of separation from one or both parents, and the potential injury or death of a parent and other fears associated with military service. As co-director of the program, I train program facilitators on the curriculum and how to deliver it to our youth. I also advocate for our program among leadership and collaborate with support services to deliver the curriculum and run the program. This program will also undergo a program implementation evaluation in the coming months and later an outcome evaluation; I am responsible for these tasks, reporting the results to leadership, and making recommendations on future implementation and improvements.

I also volunteer on the Patient and Family Partnership Council at Joint Base San Antonio—Lackland (Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center). The purpose of this council is to provide a partnership between families and the Military Treatment Facility staff to promote and support patient and family centered values thereby helping shape services focusing on patient-family needs. Specifically, my role within the council in addition to being a member, is to design and conduct focus groups within our community to better understand patient experience and needs. I am also responsible for consolidating the findings and reporting back to the council and leadership.

During the pandemic shutdowns, I collaborated with our Key Spouse leadership on base to provide our families with physical activity sessions and discussion groups regarding resiliency and stress management via zoom. Often in the military setting, we address resiliency and readiness from a holistic approach, focusing on mental, physical, and emotional domains. My dance and fitness background often come in handy when addressing resiliency, health, and even emotional processing. I also offered dance and movement classes to children where we virtually developed solidarity and a sense of community with the kids.

During my first year as a PhD student, while a small project, I designed, piloted, and evaluated an intervention aimed at increasing physical activity, nutrition knowledge, and social support of military spouses. I even received a small amount of funding for the project from our college. Additionally, I prepared for and passed my Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) certification in October of 2019 and have obtained continuing education towards maintaining my certification.

Prior to returning to school, I was an Instructional Assistant Professor at Texas A&M University (TAMU). I taught introductory health courses to non-majors, as well as a variety of dance and fitness courses (I have completed certifications in Zumba, Pilates, Barre Fitness, and Yoga) to all majors. As a Graduate Assistant now, I teach a Consumer Health course to a variety of health majors. I have also taught dance in a high school setting. Interestingly, our study of movement often lead to conversations about health! Students became comfortable and asked about topics ranging from exercise and nutrition to birth control and sexual health. In all my teaching endeavors, I aspire to help students understand that behavioral and lifestyle choices matter to their overall health and quality of life. Additionally, it is my goal to provide them with the knowledge and confidence to make good decisions regarding their health and encourage them to advocate for themselves and others regarding healthy living.

Once I graduate, I want to continue to serve military-affiliated individuals in a more official capacity. My primary professional goals in health education and promotion relate to the military population and their families. Military life comes with special challenges and obstacles, particularly when addressing health and wellness. By addressing social and behavioral determinants of health, I hope to help the military population and their families live happier and healthier lives.

Specifically, I am hoping to secure either a contractor, consultant, or general schedule (GS) position with either a military medical group or support services organization upon completion of my academic studies. This will allow me access to the military-affiliated population and an ability to work with leadership to impact change in the lives and health of service members and their families. Additionally, I hope to maintain affiliation with a University to continue research and teaching activities. I want to educate future health professionals on the military-affiliated population and their unique challenges. I also hope to educate other healthcare professionals and practitioners regarding military-affiliated individuals so they may better serve this community.

My current and future activities are likely to advance the health of children and youth, specifically in the military setting. My intention is that my future activities in health promotion directly impact military youth, but also indirectly by addressing the health of the military family unit. I plan on a direct approach through quality programs and initiatives, but I also believe in the indirect approach of strengthening military families. Likewise, while formal approaches are beneficial, additional informal efforts and maintaining a strong presence in the community, as a member of the community (as opposed to only being in the position of expert) is effective as well.

The BOUNCE program I co-direct (implementation with youth is set to begin in January) directly impacts the mental health of military youth by addressing resiliency. The curriculum was created by the Air Force and teaches resiliency skills and aims to build solidarity for our youth. Through this program, we are bringing attention to the tough topics facing our youth, discussing them openly, and providing the tools and skills necessary to navigate the challenges of the military lifestyle successfully. In the future, it is my goal to nurture this program which includes gathering data to improve it and support its continued use, continuing to advocate for the program’s availability and funding, and make it available Air Force wide.

Lastly, I am also involved as a volunteer and contractor with the Youth Center on base (as a soccer coach and dance instructor). Through these activities I can reach youth and families on a grassroots level and am often approached regarding a variety of health topics such as nutrition and age appropriate physical activity. I feel privileged to share the information I have and find additional trusted resources for these families. Sometimes it is just a matter of giving people the confidence to advocate for themselves and approach their physician with their concerns. My involvement with the children and accessibility allows me to be present for these families and I am honored to provide them with the resources necessary to make their own decisions about what is best for their health. In the future, I plan to continue these volunteer activities that facilitate a connection to children, youth, and families to positively impact change.