



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO FACULTY OF ARTS & SCIENCE

Alejandro Duque (1993–2018)

Alejandro Duque was born July 24, 1993 in Cali, Colombia. Emigrating to Canada in 1999, he and his parents, Liliana and Delio, both engineers, initially settled in Ajax, Ontario, and found jobs in nearby companies.

But as Alejandro grew up, his parents wanted to boost his social interaction and relocate to an area where he could build strong community connections, so the family moved to the East end of Toronto.

For his junior years, Alejandro went to Birchcliff Public School and also learned to play piano and bass guitar in the Scarborough Conservatory of Music.

He then attended high school at Birchmount Park Collegiate Institute. He also started playing lacrosse and developed a lifelong passion for it. In 2011, he participated in a French exchange program and traveled to France to hone his French speaking skills and to widen his cultural realm. He established a lasting relationship with a French student and his family that resulted in multiple visits to and from France.

Alejandro's high marks in high school allowed him to enter the Molecular Genetics and Microbiology program at the University of Toronto in. He lived on campus for the first year and participated in a wide variety of sports and cultural activities. He was extensively involved with U of T athletics, particularly the Varsity Blues men's lacrosse team. Following graduation, he worked as an assistant coach for the team.

Joe Nizich, the head coach of the men's lacrosse team, recalled Alejandro's contribution to the team. "When Al joined our team in 2011 coming out of Birchmount C.I., he had some difficulties adjusting to the university game, but he persevered and worked diligently to improve, to the point that Al earned the right to be one of our captains in his last two seasons. As a coach, Al took it upon himself to run our off-season strength and conditioning program, encouraging players to get better."

After obtaining a bachelor of science (Molecular Genetics and Microbiology) he went on to work as a lab technician at the Donnelly Centre for Cellular and Biomolecular Research, under the supervision of Allison Nixon and Professor Jason Moffat. Together, they conducted research on cancer stem cells markers using CRISP technology. As a result of this research, they published a report paper in *Nature* magazine on cell biology.

Before beginning graduate studies, Alejandro also carried out cancer research in the laboratory of Professor Donald Branch in the U of T's Department of Laboratory Medicine & Pathology. His direct supervisor was Dr. Anton Neschadim, CEO of ImmunoBiochem, a biotechnology company that sponsored Alejandro's project in Branch's lab.

Branch and Neschadim described Alejandro as “an ambitious, fun and energetic young man, highly motivated and autonomous,” bringing with him significant experience as a laboratory technician.”

Alejandro’s research focused on investigating the mechanism of action and pharmacology of biological products developed by ImmunoBiochem to evaluate their potential for use as part of new cancer treatments in oncological disease areas where there is a significant unmet need.

He also wanted to leverage his experience to generate an impact in oncology. He had long-term plans of becoming a translational cancer researcher, aiming to bridge the gap between fundamental research and applied research.

Shortly before an accident took his life, Alejandro had started a master’s program in the University of Toronto’s Department of Medical Biophysics, at the Rottapel Laboratory.

He died in a skimboarding accident in Lake Ontario on September 9, 2018. He was 25 years old.

Though his life was cut tragically short, he truly lived with an unbridled passion for everything he did. His memory and influence will forever live on in all that were lucky enough to know him.

“This is the guy that turns teams into families, players into brothers, turns season long bonds into lifelong friendships. This is the guy that welcomes every member of the team as if he had been there all along, who makes the players with the least talent feel as though they are greatly valued, allows the shyest guys to let loose and be themselves. Through all of this he is the guy who knows how to pick his moments. He knows when to goof off and when to get down to business. He is the perfect teammate.”

- Excerpt from the “Alejandro Duque Award,” created by the University of Toronto Varsity Blues Lacrosse team