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Angel Among Us

Todd Quinto has been bringing smiles and good cheer as a volunteer at Children's Hospital for almost 20 years

By Helene Ragovin

"Todd, do you have any eights?"

"No, I don't. Go fish."



"It has nothing to do with how smart a mathematician I am," says Todd Quinto, right, with fellow volunteer Paolo Forte, E93, G95. "I'm just here to help someone feel good." Photo: Tia Chapman

And so the 10-year-old boy with the big dark eyes, and entirely too many tubes and bandages on his thin arm, draws another card from the deck nestled among the blankets of

his hospital bed. Todd Quinto is one adult who has not come to draw blood, dispatch meds or run medical tests. Instead, he has come to play Go Fish, evoke some giggles with the aid of his trusty joke book and have fun.

By day, Quinto is the Robinson Professor of Mathematics at Tufts. But on Thursday evenings, for more than 2,300 hours over the course of 19 years, he has been a friend to hundreds of young patients at Children's Hospital Boston. As a volunteer, he talks and plays with the kids; rocks the babies; gives parents a chance to get something to eat—and on occasion, has even helped with math homework. Mostly, in his warm, soft-spoken way, he makes everyone at the hospital feel just a little bit better.

“Volunteering becomes a part of your life, and you can't imagine being without it,” says Quinto. “The idea that you can maybe make somebody feel better by being a little goofy, or by holding a little baby—it's so easy to do, but it makes you feel so good.”

Quinto has been amply recognized at Children's for his efforts. “Todd is a special human being,” declares Barbara Blundell, the supervisor of volunteer services at the hospital. “He is respected; he is loved by the staff, the other volunteers, the kids and their families.”

“When he's not here, I'm lost,” says Vicky Galloway, the administrative associate on 9S, the wing where Quinto volunteers most weeks. “I don't know how he does it. He is always smiling. Always.”

In 2003, Quinto received the Bob Groden Distinguished Service Award, a Children's Hospital humanitarian honor recognizing his leadership as a volunteer. But that is not what he wants to talk about. He would rather point out that the award went this past year to Gwen Muldoon, an octogenarian who has been volunteering at Children's for 25 years, and who is part of a tight-knit crew who eat dinner together in the hospital cafeteria every Thursday. That camaraderie, Quinto says, is another thing that has kept him coming back.

“I have a community here,” he says. “It's different from the community I work with at Tufts. When I first started volunteering, there were 20 people who would have dinner together on Thursday night,” and while that number has shrunk over the years, its value has not. “It has nothing to do with how smart a mathematician I am. I'm just here to help someone feel good,” he says.

Leading by Example

“As a teacher, you not only want to communicate good math, but also ethical values,” Quinto says. But he acknowledges that those lessons don't often come up in math class. “The only way I can hope to do it is by example.”

Quinto's compassion and earnestness obviously come through to his students. When he

received the Groden Award, a group of his students surprised him by being at Children's when it was presented. "They wanted to be a part of it, and they said he was the most important teacher in their life, and they were just full of all this good stuff about Todd as a teacher and a person," Blundell says.

In one of those "small-world" moments, a fellow volunteer on the Thursday night shift is Paolo Forte, E93, G95, a former student of Quinto's. When Forte began his volunteer training five years ago, he, like all newcomers to Children's, was assigned a seasoned volunteer to work with. By chance, Forte was paired with Quinto.

"They said, 'Oh, the person we're pairing you up with, he's a math professor at Tufts.' They didn't even have to tell me what his name was," Forte says.

"I remember having him as a professor—his personality, how caring he was with all of us, how excited he was about teaching. I could definitely see him being a volunteer at a children's hospital. Of course."

Now Quinto and Forte are a regular team, visiting the kids on 9S once a week, throughout the year. They arrive in their blue volunteer smocks, pockets filled with fun things. When infection control regulations demand it, they don hospital scrubs and gloves, but nothing interferes with their easy rapport with the kids.

While Quinto says he puts his math-teacher role behind him on Thursdays, it still manages to come through, sometimes. "When we ask the kids what their favorite subject is, and if they say math, Todd's eyes light up," Forte says, to which Quinto responds with a deep chuckle. "Then he generally tells this joke: 'Why is six afraid of seven?' About 75 percent of the time, the kids get it right away: because seven ate nine."

"Paolo got tired of that joke," Quinto says. "So he gave me this joke book, *Good Clean Jokes for Kids*." He carries the well-worn paperback with him each week.

Because of patient privacy laws, volunteers don't learn the specifics of the children's illnesses. But it's obvious that many of the kids are quite sick, and during his time at Children's, Quinto became acquainted with a few youngsters who eventually died. As a parent himself, how does Quinto handle the potentially heartbreaking aspect of visiting seriously ill children?

"Children don't necessarily realize [the situation] in the same way we do," he says. "They are happy kids—kids are kids. It is sad when somebody dies, but the strength of these children and their grace and dignity in the face of death are inspiring.

"Kids have this sense of joy, and so once you encourage that, they begin to cheer up. The kids are so glad to see you; they know you are there just to play with them," he says. "Seeing

their happiness and feeling we have helped them feel a little better are the reasons we volunteers keep coming back.”

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