Tom Barnes Merges Photography with Physical Therapy to Highlight the Positive Aspects of Healthcare

by Christopher Cussat

While many of the healthcare professionals we profile in this series often use their artistic interests as relaxing 'escapes' from the high demands of their positions, physical therapist, Tom Barnes, has found a way to incorporate his artistic passion directly into his work.

Tom Barnes

Originally from Upper St. Clair in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, Barnes attended Penn State University for his undergraduate biology degree and then completed his Master's Degree in Physical Therapy at the University of Pittsburgh in 2001. He has been associated with and has worked for Butler-based, Quality Life Services (QLS) since October 2001—first as a staff PT at the QLS-owned Chicora Medical Center and Sugar Creek Rest and then as a Site Supervisor at Chicora for six years.

Barnes is currently the Blue Sky Therapy (BST) Regional Manager for all of the QLS and Nugent Group nursing and personal care homes found in the Western Pennsylvania region. "Also, I've been a Certified Eden Associate since June of 2010, which helps to promote culture change in nursing homes to combat feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom of our elders," he adds. Barnes notes that this mission statement of BST represents an individualized, quality, patient-centered care that is in line with its nursing home partners.

Artistically, Barnes tries to promote the positive stories of therapy and nursing home care by capturing some of its happier moments through his photography and writing about many elders' success stories. He also explains how his affinity for taking photographs began at an early age. "Like many amateur photographers, I started taking pictures for my high school newspaper at Upper Saint Clair. As a kid, I always especially enjoyed photograph- ing professional baseball, hockey, and football players while they were in action—and I guess it just grew from there!"

Almost as an opposite reaction to the empirical requirements of working in healthcare, creatively capturing positive reflections of life is what Barnes feels has drawn him to photography. "My scientific side taught me to document the facts, but my artistic side drives me to capture the positive experiences and emotions in people's lives. It is kind of like a scrapbook of a fraction of all the good we do in the rehabilitation profession."

Barnes realizes that he is very fortunate to have the opportunity to blend his creative interests with his profession. "I am blessed to be able to incorporate my artistic outlet with my professional career by using photos and success stories towards the promotion of BST's innovative therapy services and our nursing home partners' skilled rehabilitation abilities."

Since his artistry is now so linked to his healthcare work, Barnes can definitely 'picture' himself in a more prominent artistic role—especially to continue showcasing the positive aspects of healthcare. "If I didn't have to work full-time, it would be a pleasure to highlight the compassionate care so many professionals in the healthcare field provide daily—as well as the hopeful, uplifting, success stories of their patients. Sometimes people only hear about the rare, negative events in healthcare (abuse, malpractice, neglect, etc.) that seem to appear at the public forefront more often—I would like to promote the far more prevalent good news!"

The photos printed here alongside the article (with permission for release from BST's QLS nursing home partners) represent just some of the powerful, happy emotions of patients and therapists that Barnes has captured with his cameras.

For more information on Blue Sky Therapy, please visit: www.blueskytherapy.net.