

Reading Buddies

AN UPSTATE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM PROVIDES THE GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP.

Upstate medical student Alex Paley '19 was such a familiar face at Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Syracuse, he grew to expect the exuberant greeting from third-graders.

"There's Antwain's reading buddy!" they'd shout when Paley walked down the halls.

That was four years ago, early in Paley's first year in the College of Medicine.

He'd heard about the Center for Civic Engagement's Reading Buddies program at Dr. King Elementary School, which pairs Upstate students with elementary students who typically need extra help or are ahead of grade level.

Paley signed up, and was assigned to work with third-grader Antwain Anderson. The program calls for weekly visits, either Tuesday or Wednesday afternoons, but Paley enjoyed it so much he ended up going two or three days a week.

Antwain was nervous at first, but he and Paley hit it off fairly quickly.

"We started with a kids' mystery, a chapter book about stolen Egyptian treasure," Paley said. "Antwain could pronounce 'sarcophagus' and many other challenging words. He has a robust vocabulary."

It didn't take long for Antwain's personality to emerge, much to Paley's delight.

"He's intentionally hilarious," Paley said. "He once asked me if he could come to my wedding, knowing that I wasn't engaged or even dating at the time."

That Paley took to the experience wasn't entirely surprising. The Albany native comes from a family of teachers that include his mother, aunt, uncle, and grandmother. Paley decided to pursue medicine after earning his bachelor's

degree in engineering from the University of Miami, and spent five years as a substitute teacher in the Albany City School District while taking science courses at Hudson Valley Community College and SUNY Albany.

During his second year in the College of Medicine, Paley continued to meet with Antwain. Their reading list ranged from the Goosebumps series to science books to a biography of former president Barack Obama.

"I volunteered for the program because I thought I might be good at it, but I had no expectation about getting anything out of it myself," he says.

And what has he gained from the experience?

"Honestly," he says, "a really good friend."

"His reading level was a few grades ahead," Paley says.

Most medical students in the Reading Buddies program typically only last for a year or two due to the demands of their schedule once they hit clinical rotations in their third and fourth years.

Antwain was dismayed to learn Paley would be spending his third year of medical school in Binghamton, part of the 40-student cohort doing his rotations at the Binghamton Clinical Campus. But distance would not be Paley's greatest obstacle.

In the fall of that year, Paley suffered an excruciating headache and went to the hospital emergency room after work to get checked out. The medical staff noticed a slight paralysis in his face and an MRI revealed a brain tumor—a malignant glioblastoma. Paley was transferred to Syracuse, where Lawrence Chin, MD, chair of the Upstate Department of Neurosurgery, performed an eight-hour emergency surgery to remove it.

His diagnosis was shocking. Paley was known to friends and classmates as an exemplar in terms of healthy eating and lifestyle. He had attended college on a running scholarship and running continued to be a big part of his life. Undoubtedly, that foundation of good habits, combined with a will to fight back, helped Paley persevere.

Paley took a leave from his medical studies to go home to Albany to a neuro-rehabilitation center, and then to Sloan Kettering in New York City to begin radiation and chemotherapy. Ultimately, he underwent a year-long regimen of chemotherapy, which consisted of a recurring cycle of five days on treatment, 23 days off.

Paley says he was grateful for his medical knowledge, which saved him from having to educate himself during his medical crisis. He wasn't as scared or overwhelmed as he imagines he would have been otherwise and was able to explain things to family. While he definitely prefers being a medical student to being a patient, he made the best of the situation, learning about medicine from a new vantage point. "I feel like the experience is going to help me be a better doctor," he says.

Paley came to Syracuse to attend Antwain's "moving up" ceremony at the end of fifth grade that June. "He won an



Fourth-year medical student Alex Paley and his "reading buddy," Antwain Anderson, enjoy a book together in the Health Sciences Library.

academic award. His mom was proud and I was proud, too," he says.

Paley was worried that Antwain would be freaked out by his then-bald scalp and scar. "Did you have a brain tumor," he asked, matter of factly.

Paley resumed medical school in Fall 2017, finishing up his third-year clinical rotations. While his illness pushed his medical school graduation from 2018 to 2019, Paley reframes it by saying it gives him more time with Antwain. "He's one of the silver linings of being here for another year," he said. "We still hang out. He'll call or text. He really appreciates the attention."

They've gone berry picking with other medical students and their reading

buddies, played Frisbee, and attended a Syracuse University basketball game after Antwain received free tickets for his stellar school attendance record. Paley brought Antwain to Upstate's campus, showing him the Practice of Medicine classrooms, the library, and the cafeteria in Weiskotten Hall that looks out over the city of Syracuse.

"We went up to the ninth floor and I showed him where his house is," Paley says. "He'd make a good doctor, but he's freaked out by how long medical school is. He wants to be a video game programmer."

Antwain is now in seventh grade at the Expeditionary Learning Middle School (ELMS) on South Salina Street.

Paley has more time on his hands this year, as he finishes up electives and begins interviewing for residency programs. Recently, the two got together to work on Antwain's math homework.

Paley plans to pursue family medicine and wants to stay in the Northeast, ideally in the Syracuse or Albany area. He concedes that he doesn't know of any other medical students whose relationship with their reading buddy has extended so long. "I volunteered for the program because I thought I might be good at it, but I had no expectation about getting anything out of it myself," he says.

And what has he gained from the experience? "Honestly," he says, "a really good friend."