

BETTER HEALTH COMMUNICATION

By Naomi Tene' Austin



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

With one toddler and two preschool aged children, a typical day in the Martin household is always lively. “Things can go from calm to chaotic pretty quickly,” says Andrew Martin. “Usually when I get home things are relatively calm, but it’s never too long before Sarah, two-and-a-half years old, starts fussing, and Bryce, five-and-a-half years old, starts running around the kitchen table, and Alyssa (four-years-old) begins chasing him.” Quick to credit his wife, Rachel, for her exceptional ability to bring calm to chaos, he

notes that her proficient multitasking skills were at least partially honed by her experience as a teacher. Andrew, who himself, has spent the majority of his career working with children as a social worker, does not take for granted the impact that their career training has played in their method of child rearing. “We definitely make an effort to raise our kids to be respectful of people, to be nice to people, and to love and accept people’s differences,” he says. “We make our kids say sorry to each other if they’ve hurt each other,

and that’s really to instill a sense of empathy.”

Originally from Philadelphia, Andrew has always been fond of Williamsburg. “When I was in middle school, my 8th grade field trip was in Williamsburg. My parents chaperoned, and we spent 3 days exploring Busch Gardens, Colonial Williamsburg and The Pottery. I never envisioned that I would one day live here,” he says. Now, he couldn’t imagine raising his family anywhere else. “I love this community. I feel like it really has been a family-oriented, open community.

There's a lot of diversity here from people having different backgrounds to being different races and cultures. It's really a melting pot, and that's a huge strength," he says. In addition to the diverse culture, he and his family also enjoy the many amenities that the area has to offer. "There is plenty to do from Busch Gardens to Water Country and even all the different parks in the county."

Having recently assumed a new role as Outreach Coordinator for Williamsburg's Literacy for Life Program, Andrew's focus is centered primarily on the organization's Health Education and Literacy (HEAL) Program. The ProLiteracy award winning initiative seeks to increase health literacy among participants, giving them the necessary tools to understand and take responsibility for their own healthcare decisions. Largely funded by the Williamsburg Health Foundation, HEAL takes a two-pronged approach to bridge communication gaps between healthcare providers and their low-literacy patients. "The goal is to teach patients how to better communicate with their doctors, while helping medical professionals to effectively communicate with low literacy patients from all kinds of cultural backgrounds," he says.

His passion for serving others was developed at an early age. Watching his father, who was an Episcopalian priest, serve and work with people, had a big influence on Andrew.

"I knew early on that I wanted to help people, though I didn't want to become a priest," he says. "Social work was a natural fit for me." The Catholic grade school he attended in Philadelphia had a strong emphasis on service. Andrew recalls walking the city streets with his class and passing out sandwiches to homeless people. "When I was in high school I volunteered at a nursing home," he recalls. "I would wheel them out, pop in a VHS movie and then help them back to their rooms. It felt good to feel like I was making a difference."

Prior to his current role, Andrew spent fourteen years rotating through various posi-

tions in the field of social work after obtaining his master's degree from Virginia Commonwealth University. Once he actually got into his field, Andrew quickly discovered the reality of the work was different from the study of it.

"I completed an internship so I had a glimpse of what it was going to take but I also think I was so new that I was naïve to think I could help everyone and break through and change people's lives," he says. "When you're actually doing it day in and day out, taking work home with you, dealing with deadlines, processes and procedures, it becomes very real."

He has worked in roles spanning from Child Protective Services (CPS) to Foster Care, to working with an independent non-profit consulting firm to help older youth learn independent living skills. "I came into the field of social work just as there was a shift in child welfare from keeping children in foster care to helping them really find a family that they can call Mom and Dad, or at least someone they could relate to." His extensive experience in social work, mostly in Richmond, was both challenging and fulfilling.

Andrew recalls one of his more rewarding experiences with a young girl who was in foster care. "This particular young lady was a teenager when I met her. She was having a hard time really just knowing who she was, which is normal at that age, but with everything she had experienced, it was a real challenge for her." Now, in her twenties, the young lady is thriving as a youth advisor for the same program that she came through as a teenager. "Those are the rewarding experiences," he says.

His current role with Literacy for Life is a complete career shift from his prior jobs. Still, his background working with the public and liaising with agencies and businesses actually transfer perfectly into his new job. For Andrew, the decision to take his career in this new direction was an easy one. "When I interviewed, I quickly picked up on the

positive energy of the team and collaborative work environment they nurtured," he says. "Joan Peterson, Executive Director of Literacy for Life, really has been the guiding force. She has a very clear vision and that reflects in the entire team."

In addition to developing partnerships with local businesses to promote HEAL, Andrew coordinates community outreach for the Work Skills Program. "With a grant from the Department of Education, we have committed to providing OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) training as well as ServSafe training and our learners have really taken advantage of those offerings," he says. With food service being such a vital part of the local economy, the Work Skills Program serves a great purpose both for learners who can use their certifications to better market themselves and for business owners who benefit from a greater pool of qualified candidates.

Andrew makes no qualms about the fact that his job as Outreach Coordinator is to build a self-sustaining pipeline of learners as well as great business partnerships that he'll eventually work himself out of the role, at least as it currently stands.

"A year from now, I would like to be at a place where I have such great relationships in the community my job actually evolves to connecting clients with jobs and resources based on my relationships with local businesses," he says.

An additional perk is that his office, located at the College of William & Mary's School of Education, is a relatively short commute from his home in Toano. "This is the first time since 2005 that I have had a twenty-minute commute to work," he says. Andrew has a lot to be happy about these days. He lives in a community that he loves, his vibrant young family keeps him on his toes, and by helping people take better care of themselves and become more self-sufficient through his role with Literacy for Life, he has discovered a new way to fulfill his lifelong passion for service. NDN