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True tales of selfless love

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I'VE BEEN TRYING to get into a holiday mood in which I'm bursting with love for my fellow man.

But I keep getting sidetracked by the wrong love stories.

Like the twisted obsession that identity thieves Jocelyn Kirsch and Edward Anderton have for each other. And the lowbrow hijinks of media paramours Alycia Lane and Chris Booker.

I relish a tawdry tale as much as the next rubber-necker.

But, c'mon: As we move through what ought to be a season of hope, surely there are more inspiring local love connections than these? Ones that compel us to open our own arms a little wider?

Of course there are.

Part of what makes the following love stories so wonderful is that no charity facilitated them - not that there's anything wrong with the bonds made in the process of, say, volunteering for a do-good nonprofit.

But there's something so simple about these love connections, sprung from initial kindnesses that have grown into something life-changing for everyone.

These people are family to each other - even though no biological connection or legal document binds them. That's because their hearts have already done the work.

A place to be

At age 20, Abdur Wakil is like most guys his age. He loves sports and videogames and sharing them with friends. Abdur's life, though, is complicated by muscular dystrophy. The illness didn't keep him from graduating from Cheltenham High School, located near the Elkins Park home he shares with his mother, grandmother and sister.

But as his disease has advanced - he is now in a wheelchair and may soon need help eating - it has isolated him from peers who have left town for college or moved on to busy lives of growing responsibility.

He would feel lonely and left behind if not for the touching camaraderie of the men and women of the LaMott Volunteer Fire Company, on Penrose Avenue in Elkins Park.

Seven days a week, Abdur dons a LaMott uniform and rides his wheelchair two blocks to the station, where he is an honorary member.

He stays all day.

"LaMott's my home," says Abdur, who passes time at the firehouse watching sports and ribbing the firefighters to whom he has become a younger brother. "It's so much fun to be here."

But Abdur also contributes to the fire company in crucial ways, says firefighter John Mulligan.

"He keeps track of who is on which truck when we go out, he mans the station when we're on calls, he helps bring in equipment," he says. "He's a very important part of this company."

Abdur's steady, sunny presence adds something else to the company, says LaMott Chief Dave Schwartz.

"He gets us to open our hearts a little more."

That includes respecting Abdur's desire for physical independence, for as long as he has it.

So each night, when it's time for Abdur's wheelchair ride home, a volunteer slowly follows him in a LaMott service vehicle, lights flashing to alert other drivers to give way.

"We love Abdur," says Mulligan. "This place wouldn't be the same without him."

Nor would Abdur's life be as rich without them.

Two families fall in love

Readers of this column may recall Chinika Perez, the 28-year-old single mom who nearly died in 2006 from a gunshot wound. I wrote in August of her catastrophic injuries: her right leg is missing at the hip; her left one below the knee; her hands are frozen at right angles from nerve damage.



And yet, I wrote, Chinika's spirit is triumphant. She's cheery, funny and determined. And when she feels down, she looks at her kids - Bianca and Matthew - and thanks God again that she's alive to raise them.

Gerry Dugan read her story and had to do something. A former lawyer in the DA's office, he's now in private practice with more than he needs of practically everything.

Including an excess of love, apparently.

He called the Daily News and arranged for him and his wife, Bernadette, to meet with Chinika, to see how they could help her.

It was love at first sight.

"She's an inspiration," says Gerry.

"They're so sweet!" says Chinika "They didn't even know me, and they wanted to help me. Who does that kind of thing?"

Since August, the Dugans have helped support Chinika financially, and they have arranged for the installation of a desperately needed wheelchair ramp -it arrives Christmas Eve - that will let her leave her house easily.

In 2008, the Dugans want to help Chinika's family raise funds for a handicapped-accessible van. And they hope to find a surgeon to restore Chinika's hand function, which would let her finally use crutches.

Says Gerry elatedly, "Think of the mobility it would give her!"

I would. But I'm too bowled over by how Chinika and the Dugans - strangers just four months ago - are now entwined in a dance of love.

A weekend family

Terry Whitaker has two kids - but five if you count the three girls who have become so much a part of her family, they feel like her own.

Back in 2004, Terry, a Realtor who lives in Merion Station, met Danielle Wheeler, now 15, and sisters Shontae and Shameria Mason, now ages 15 and 16 respectively, when she held a career workshop for Philly teens at the Point Breeze Performing Arts Center.

The girls and Terry so adored each other that Terry invited them to her home for a Saturday get-together to meet her husband, son and daughter.

Three years later, all are fixtures in each other's lives. The girls visit the Whitakers on weekends, sometimes staying for a week or more in summer. Terry and her family attend barbecues, block parties and birthday celebrations at the girls' homes in Philly.

Terry functions as a sort of godmother/mentor/friend to Danielle, Shontae and Shameria. The girls and their families have added abundant new energy and perspective to the Whitaker household. For all of them, love has transcended racial, economic and cultural differences

"The girls come from such wonderful homes," says Terry, "really strong and good people."

Shanan Cartwright, mother of Danielle, who's a sophomore at John W. Hallahan High School, is as enamored of Terry and her family.

"Terry's amazing - so kind and giving. I feel so fortunate that my daughter has her in her life."

Terry - whose goal is to help all three girls get into college - echoes the sentiment.

"It's funny," she says. "I thought, when I first invited the girls to my home, that I was doing them a favor, giving them a break from city life."

She realized that she had the better deal one Christmas, when she was trying to coordinate schedules so that she'd get to see Danielle, Shontae and Shameria during the holidays.

"I was desperate to get us together," she says. "I kept saying, 'I need all my babies with me, not just two!'"

That's when she knew who the lucky one really was.

A hospital's embrace

When Kyler Vannocker was diagnosed in July with neuroblastoma - a cancer of the nervous system - his parents, Paul and Maria, never thought that the quality of a hospital's janitorial or food-service staff would make a bit of difference in their fight to save 3-year-old Kyler's life.

Six months later, they know better.

“I cannot say enough about this place,” says Paul Vannocker about the medical care and staff at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children, where Kyler just underwent surgery to remove a tumor, following chemotherapy.

“They treat Kyler like he’s their own child. They will do anything to help, no matter what it takes.”

When your child’s prognosis is uncertain, as Kyler’s is, and you have two other small children at home, the way the Vannockers do, having staff treat you like family feels like a miracle in itself.

“This is a special place,” says Kyler’s doctor, oncologist Marta Rozans, a recent transplant from New Orleans, where the hospital she worked at was destroyed by Katrina. “If some hospitals feel like malls, this one is a boutique. It’s small, everyone knows each other.”

Maria Vannocker tells how, in the frantic early days of her son’s diagnosis, when she had gone almost two days without eating a real meal, the hospital’s head surgeon picked up a take-out dinner for her and ordered her to eat it.

Paul tells of the nurses on Kyler’s unit who stay late without complaint. Of food-service workers who play with his son. Housekeeping staff who know his family by name.

“As bad as this has been,” he says, “and knowing that your child has cancer is as bad as it gets, this hospital has made us feel like we’re not in it alone.”

That will be critical in the coming months, as Kyler undergoes additional chemo, radiation treatments and two bone-marrow transplants.

“We love these people. We know they love Kyler. We know they love us,” he adds. *

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Photograph by: Feed Loader

Chinika Perez, embraced by attorney Jerry Dugan.