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Student Profiles: Tony Emerson, Gonzaga University

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Student Profile

Tony and Antonio

By Kristina Crawley

He's a 19-year-old college sophomore who can't wait to be a dad some day. For a number of reasons Tony Emerson is not your average Joe College.

Instead of sitting around calculating how many more classes he can skip and still slide by, or trying to figure out who's throwing the biggest party, this Gonzaga University English major devotes his free time to the thing he loves most: children. As the youngest child of seven, Emerson was an uncle from the time he was born, and has always been surrounded by children.

"It's a good thing I like kids," he said, "because I wouldn't have gotten along otherwise."

During high school in Eugene, Oregon, Emerson worked as a counselor at a local Christian camp. When he came to Gonzaga last year, however, he found something missing, something he wasn't getting in his classes or from other activities. He looked to get involved in something that would give him the opportunity to interact with children again.

He found what he was looking for in an on-campus mentoring program called Campus Kids. A prototype for similar programs that have sprung up around the country over the past five years, Gonzaga's Campus Kids program is a partnership with Spokane Public Schools that pairs university students with children from local elementary schools. Once a week, the college mentors meet with their kids to hang out, help them with homework and study skills, and participate in fun group activities.

Emerson calls that day "the high point of my week. It's completely different from everything else you experience (in college), because you're never around kids (otherwise)."

Last year, Emerson mentored Antonio, a fourth-grader from Stevens



Tony Emerson

Elementary. Although Antonio was behind in school — still having trouble reading and writing — he had a big heart and creative spirit, which struck Emerson immediately.

He remembers the first time he met Antonio. The two knew of each other only through an exchange of pictures, and Emerson knew of Antonio's struggles in school. But when Antonio bounded off that school bus onto campus for the first time and the two met, it was so much more than Emerson had ever expected.

"You're Tony!" the youngster said running up to his new mentor. "I can tell by the hair," he explained, referring to Emerson's rather noticeable Afro-style do. It was a match made in heaven and the two hit it off immediately.

Emerson worked tirelessly with Antonio, always willing to go over concepts again and again until Antonio learned. He was constantly trying to find new ways to help Antonio, working with his teacher and asking Campus Kids administrators for help in planning lessons to assist Antonio with reading and writing.

Most important, he gave Antonio unconditional support and love, providing

the youngster with someone he could look up to and count on.

"These kids need consistency and they need a firm foundation to stand on because they don't always get it at home," said Katie Best, the parent-teacher liaison for Campus Kids.

Antonio certainly got that from Emerson, who told him that whenever he found himself getting frustrated, he would look back on his own childhood as a struggling student whose teachers always gave the extra effort to help him along.

"They spent the extra time on me," Emerson said. "Antonio deserves the same."

And Emerson definitely put in the time, going to Antonio's gymnastics tournaments and

other extracurricular activities to show his support in all aspects of Antonio's life.

"Tony once told me with a look of awe in his face, 'Antonio can do a backflip like no other. He is amazing!'" said Best. "They have a really close relationship and you can tell Tony really cares about Antonio."

By the end of the year, all that caring and hard work had paid off. Antonio is now reading and writing nearly at grade level. Best said she's never seen another child in the program improve so significantly.

But this story is far from over, as Emerson and Antonio are again matched in Campus Kids this year. And it might be hard to tell which one of the two is more excited about the learning prospects ahead.

"I'm just so proud of the little guy and I can't wait to see how far he's going to go this year," Emerson said.

Kristina Crawley, a senior, is editor of Gonzaga's student paper, the Bulletin.