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Grad overcame Tourette's *Disorder sometimes made him outcast*

By Lori Kurtzman
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The schoolyard beatings were frequent when Monte Allen was a kid. He'd be left with blackened eyes and torn clothing and more crushed eyeglasses than he cares to remember.

And that was from the girls.

Finally his parents enrolled him in martial arts classes. He needed to defend himself.

When you call women the things Allen sometimes calls them, you're bound to get slugged.

"People either love me or they hate me," Allen says as he walks into the University of Cincinnati's Tangeman University Center one afternoon.

Allen, a recent UC graduate - more about that later, because it was quite an accomplishment - is 26, slender and attractive. He's dressed in a collared shirt and wears a cross around his neck. Under his breath, he calls you an unprintable name, then another. He apologizes. He tells a janitor to perform an obscene act. He apologizes. He extends a finger and tries to poke you, then puts his hands in his pocket.

He apologizes again.

Allen carries business cards in his wallet that ask, in big, red letters, what you're likely wondering: "WHY DO I ACT THIS WAY?"

"Because I can't control it," the card continues. "I have Tourette syndrome - a medical condition. It causes me to make loud sounds, have twitches and say things I don't mean. ... I'm sorry if it bothers you - it bothers me as well."

'IT'S A WAR'

Allen says the things we might only think about the people who pass us by. He'll comment on a person's weight or the color of his skin or the mole on her face. He'll swear for no reason and reach out to poke strangers. He'll go to say one thing and the opposite will pop out of his mouth. Sometimes he hurts people's feelings; often he feels guilty.

"It's a war," he said.

He was 11, an "upper lower-class" kid in Youngstown, when he was diagnosed with Tourette's. He'd begun blurting things out in class and a teacher called his mother in for a conference.

Tourette's is a nervous system disorder, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, "characterized by repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations."

It wasn't understood at his school, he said. Teachers tried to put him in special education classes. After a doctor suggested he needed a quiet place to go to relax, an art teacher had him work in a tiny storage room that grew so hot he once fainted, he said.

Eventually he enrolled at a vocational school, where things were better. He graduated in 1999 and wanted a fresh start. When his aunt came from Springdale for the graduation ceremony, he returned with her and moved into her basement. He bought a bed with his graduation money. The possibilities in Cincinnati seemed endless.

Until reality sneaked in.

COLLEGE? YES, COLLEGE

He'd apply for a job only to end up with another that would keep him behind the scenes. He became a housekeeper. A dishwasher. He'd stock shelves at night. He fought employers who he felt were discriminating against him. As he grew stressed, his Tourette's became more pronounced - and dangerous. He began sticking things into electrical sockets and sniffing ammonia and burning himself.

Finally he checked into a hospital and stayed for a week. He moved out of his aunt's house and into the now-demolished Huntington Meadows apartments.

Life seemed bleak.

One day in 2001 he stopped by a community center and a man there asked if he wanted to go to college.

College? Yes. College.

This is how Monte Allen ended up crossing the stage last weekend at UC's graduation. And as with most of Allen's life, this was no smooth story.

He'd wanted to be a high-school teacher but said he met with resistance from faculty members at UC who questioned whether his tics and frequent cursing would allow him to get such a job. He finally decided to just get a degree, any degree, so he could get out of there.

"About two years ago he came ... asking if he could be a student in our program," said Sue Bourke, an associate professor in the university's division of criminal justice. "We knew Monte had Tourette's, but we didn't know Monte."

They soon found out. He cursed at professors and classmates and once called Bourke a name so rude he didn't come back to class for a while, embarrassed to face her. He'd have tics throughout class and sometimes become such a distraction he'd have to leave the room. But nobody complained, Bourke said. In fact, they embraced him.

"I said, 'We'll work through this,'" said one instructor, Paula Smith, who jokes that Allen's comments have been her motivation to stick with Weight Watchers.

Then came a huge obstacle: Criminal justice graduates need 144 hours of internship experience to graduate. Bourke wondered what to do - they couldn't put him in a cruiser and didn't want to risk sending him to a prison where the inmates might not be so understanding.

Ultimately she called UC police, who agreed to take him on and put him to work on computers and security cameras.

"It was unbelievable," Bourke said. "Every secretary in that department was called some horrible name ... and they absolutely loved him."

That's the thing about Allen. You'd think a guy who dished out so many insults might be tough to like. But it's just the opposite. Smith and Bourke rave about him. They say his classmates are fiercely protective of him. "He is just a kind and gentle person," Bourke says.

And though he had come into criminal justice reluctantly, he ended up enjoying it. He finished in the winter with about \$44,000 in debt and now is a research assistant in the criminal justice department, until a grant dries up. And then, who knows what. He has a dream job in mind - theft prevention for a department store - but he doesn't think he's ready to apply just yet.

But someday.