



when worlds collide

for Patti Patterson, MD, MPH, (Family Medicine Resident '83) a professional life dedicated to the needs of children who have been abused mentally, physically and sexually began with a small boy on an emergency room stretcher. While serving a clinical rotation as part of her pediatric residency at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Patterson met Thomas "Tommy" Triveno (now Thomas Freeman), a fragile patient under her care.

Though he was 2 years old, Tommy looked closer to a 9-month-old. He had a dozen broken bones. And he was covered in bruises.

"I remember vividly when I realized this was a case of child abuse," Patterson said. "I approached him to draw blood, to 'stick' him, which makes most children cry and scream. Tommy didn't cry or scream. He just took it. Without tears." She realized that hurt and pain must be regular occurrences for this tiny child.

Tommy stayed two weeks as his body healed. Patterson visited him frequently. "He was having trouble walking because of his failure to thrive and his malnutrition. He certainly wasn't doing things most 2-year-olds do. We spent many hours in the rocking chair. He wanted to 'hold me.'"

Patterson last saw Tommy at a follow-up doctor's appointment after he was discharged from the hospital. She remembers him hiding behind his new foster mother and hoping, finally, he had an adult to cling to and to hold.

BY JO GRANT LANGSTON
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THOMAS FREEMAN

The Spark to Save Children Patterson, professor in the School of Medicine Department of Pediatrics and director of child abuse pediatrics, found her passion for abused children when she met Tommy. This passion inspired her to create the Center for Superheroes, the only mental health clinic in West Texas or eastern New Mexico providing specialized care for children and adolescents like Tommy. She wanted a solution for these children.

“We needed specialized healing treatments for them,” she added. “As children, their needs are unique and require a different kind of intervention. Children don’t have the tools to fight abuse when it happens to them, so they learn to cope with the physical and mental hurt. They are often abused by those whom they love and depend on, creating major issues of trust.”

Once in 30 Years Patterson still remembers locking eyes with Tommy 33 years ago. “He so touched my heart. I was drawn to finding a way to help these children,” she said.

But there is more to their story.


In April of this year, Tommy called Patterson. He was trying to find his birth parents. He had his medical records from the emergency room in Galveston. Patterson’s name was in those charts as a member of his care team. So, he searched and found this very special doctor.

She explained to Tommy the enormous impact he had on her life. She told him how his case led to her calling—to take care of kids who had experienced what he went through and to advocate for those who, many times, have no voice.

Patterson was amazed when Tommy said she saved his life. “He thanked *me*. I was flabbergasted,” she said.

Today, Tommy is happily married, with three children and a wonderful job, Patterson said. She also received a text near the end of April from Tommy sharing the news of his new baby daughter’s birth.

Patterson smiles as she recounts his story. “Every 30 years, you get something right in child abuse. Knowing that this boy who impacted me so importantly is doing well makes all the difference to me. It’s why I am so dedicated to caring for these children.”

That chance encounter in a Galveston hospital saved a child and laid the groundwork for Patterson’s dedication and passion. Worlds collided in a most wonderful way. 



Thomas Freeman with his new baby daughter.

MY SUPERHERO, DR. PATTI PATTERSON

Dr. Patterson is my superhero because she was my pediatric doctor and cared for my well-being when I arrived at UTMB Galveston on April 10, 1984.

She did a medical overview of my condition and health and saw fit to act immediately. Without her professional expertise and knowledge, I would have most definitely ended up dead. I needed extensive medical care and support, and she, along with the rest of the pediatric staff, cared for me around the clock while I was in PICU (pediatric intensive care unit). Patti would come visit me and hold me before and after her shifts and would even visit me on her days off.

I found her this year (I Googled her) working in Lubbock and got in touch with her.

In my baby book I have a photo of Dr. Patterson holding me while I held a toy toaster. This photo has always held a special place in my heart.

Without her love and caring heart, I would not be here today, and I thank her for taking care of me.

I feel honored that I have impacted her life as she has mine, especially now that she has opened/helped open the Center for Superheros and that her expertise is now focusing on abused/neglected children.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for protecting me Dr. Patti Patterson.

Sincerely,
Thomas (Tommy) Lee (Triveno) Freeman