

# Project Sunshine Brings Hope to Hospitalized Kids



Quemuel Arroyo (right) interacts with children as a volunteer with Project Sunshine, a non-profit that brings education and recreation programs to kids facing medical challenges.

**B**eatrice Kernan, executive director of Project Sunshine, cites Quemuel Arroyo, a 21-year-old urban planning major at NYU, as “a shining star in the constellation of volunteers for our organization.” With a corps group of over 10,000 volunteers that are recruited and trained worldwide, that’s a huge handclap.

The non-profit brings free educational, recreational and social programs to over 60,000 children (and their families) facing medical challenges in hospitals and other facilities in New York City, across the United States and internationally.

Arroyo knows how it feels to be a pediatric patient in a hospital. From 2007 to 2008, he spent 11 months in physical therapy at The Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine after a mountain biking accident left him paralyzed from the waist down.

“It is hard enough being 21 years old without being in a wheelchair,” says Quemuel, who spent his senior year of high school at Rusk, the only teen in a ward of five to 10-year-old pediatric patients.

For Arroyo, Project Sunshine opened up his world. In one case, a volunteer, who shared an interest in photography, brought pictures of recent trips that helped renew Arroyo’s interest

in travelling. “It was such a welcome change from constant medical talk,” he says.

In fact, one of the corporate mentors from Project Sunshine gave the young man the courage to apply to college. “I had always been a very good student, but after my accident, I lost interest in school. I thought ‘how can I go to college in a wheelchair?’ She took a special interest in me and encouraged me,” Arroyo says.

“Looking back, I give those volunteers credit for rebuilding my confidence and showing me that being in a wheelchair didn’t make me an outsider. My life wasn’t over.”

In June 2008, after completing his high school degree at the hospital, Arroyo took a cab with his home attendant to a freshman dorm at NYU. His life has been fast forward ever since. He changed his major from economics to urban design and architecture studies when he realized that 1/4 of New York train stations are not wheelchair accessible.

“Having gone through this experience I felt like the least I could do is to give back,” says Arroyo, who volunteers with friends from NYU at Rusk a couple of evenings a month.

“We don’t talk about medicine, or how it’s going, we are just there to have fun with the kids. They are part of society and they are

not outsiders. Now, as a volunteer, I get such fulfillment and joy, knowing that I am just a friend to them.”

Joseph Weilgus founded Project Sunshine in 1998 out of his college dormitory room at Yeshiva University in New York City when he was a sophomore. Weilgus was inspired after visiting a hospitalized child who was a friend of the family.

“Joseph had a wonderful effervescent spirit which he shared with all of the children in that bleak ward,” notes Kernan. It was from those initial visits that Weilgus came to realize that these children needed everything from conversation and emotional support to academic help. Soon he began matching his college friends with different facilities and Project Sunshine started spreading to other campuses. Currently, the organization is in 210 medical facilities worldwide, 39 of which are in the New York City area.

“There are places where kids are just languishing, the staff is so busy and parents are stressed financially and taking care of other children. The way children are built, they are a little less guarded and more willing to release their inner sunshine. Children light up when they are given the opportunity,” says Kernan.

The non-profit offers a wide range of servic-

es. The reading programs have regular book buddies including Francisco Cervelli of the New York Yankees, New York Giant’s David Diehl, R.L. Stine, a children’s book author, and Sonia Manzano, Maria on Sesame Street.

Kernan adds, “We also provide tutoring, mentoring and self-esteem building for teenagers and initiatives which include Sunshine Chefs, with nutritional cooking lessons, creating murals with Paint the Halls, and Spa Programs for parents and care-givers funded by Estee Lauder.”

“It’s such a beautiful symbiotic relationship, the gain is even more for the volunteer,” adds Arroyo.

When asked how he keeps such a positive attitude, he laughed, “My name in Hebrew means ‘And God stood up!’”

For more information, call 1-866 PSUNSHINE or visit [www.projectsunshine.org](http://www.projectsunshine.org)

— Holly Reich

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Big Town Big Heart is a series of articles showcasing organizations and volunteers who make a difference.