

## Michael Crosa — Overcoming Tourette's, Living Our Ideals

**Michael Crosa**, *Alpha Rho (North Carolina) '09*, is a Sinfonian, a musician, a teacher and mentor, a public speaker, an advocate for psychological understanding, a master bell ringer, and a recent graduate. He also has Tourette's syndrome. Crosa's struggle with Tourette's, how it at times threatened to take over his personal identity, and subsequently how Crosa turned that silent threat into meaning and purpose, has helped define him as a man.

Tourette's Syndrome is a neurological disorder marked by uncontrollable movements called tics. These can be of the body (physical tics) or of sounds or even words (vocal tics). It is estimated that 200,000 people in the United States have this disorder.

"Most kids develop Tourette's gradually between the ages of, say, five and ten," explains Crosa. "Mine came on very suddenly when I was 16 – on March 16, 2007 at about 1:30 in the afternoon, not that I celebrate the date or anything like that. In high school I already had my group of friends set and they knew me before having Tourette's. In fact, since it was so sudden, it seemed like "wow, this could have happened to any one of us!" So thankfully, I got a lot of support from the community. So at first my Tourette's was this kind of secondary "thing," an external being dictating my actions. Once I got to college at the University of North Carolina that became more difficult – I was meeting lots and lots of new people who hadn't known me pre-Tourette's. They were meeting me as a "full package," not really aware of the secondary external feelings I had about my Tourette's. Most just assumed I had had it all of my life!" This jarring experience was a challenge to adapt to, but it led to a number of outlets that have improved Crosa's control over his symptoms as well as his personal confidence about having Tourette's.

One of the ways Crosa helps to manage his tics is with music. "For many people," he explains, "playing a musical instrument will completely get rid of the tics. I haven't exactly found that to be the case for myself, but it still helps. One of the activities that can be very helpful is a drum circle. What's great about hand drums is that they're easy to play if you've never played one before, but offer the potential for virtuosic skill. In a drum circle everyone can contribute equally to the greater sound no matter what their skill level is." Crosa has parleyed his interest in music, and its ability to help those with Tourette's, into a mentoring role. "At one point I worked at a camp called Camp Twitch and Shout, an annual camp for kids with Tourette's that takes place in Georgia, and I got to be the drum circle facilitator. It was so much fun for me! I got to lead kids in musical activities and games that took their minds off of their disorder, if only for a little while."

Crosa's also been very outspoken about the disorder itself. Not only has this empowered him personally to speak about his condition, but it has had the added benefit of teaching others about Tourette's. "I had always wanted to be able to get people laughing by telling Tourette's jokes from my perspective," he says, "because all too often Tourette's is falsely portrayed as the "funny" disorder in Hollywood. My first attempt at speaking was during a stand-up comedy competition, at which Lewis Black was present." The video is still available online, and can be found on Youtube by typing "Crosa Stands Up" in the search. "It went phenomenally," he says. "I didn't win the competition, but I had the confidence to speak about my experiences." The stand-up experience led to other opportunities for Crosa around the UNC

campus. He became a regular speaker for the UNC Psychology department, and has logged over 25 total speeches on Tourette's during his time there.

Tourette's has become a large part of Crosa's involvement and outreach, but it hasn't monopolized his time. One of the more notable positions he's had in recent years is the title of "Master Bell Ringer" on the UNC Campus. The Morehead-Patterson Bell Tower towers above the campus and is a significant landmark for both collegians and alumni. Crosa explains the title, saying "Back in the day, there was a team of bell ringers that would take turns going up to the bell tower throughout the day to ring it, and the lead guy had the title "master bell ringer." Students would come up just to watch them ring, it was a big social event. As technology has advanced, there is less of a need for a whole team." These technological advances didn't stop Crosa from being active in his duty. "Mostly, I went up on special occasions. For example, I tolled the bell for ceremonies on September 11<sup>th</sup> and Memorial Day. Other than that I did the occasional tour – recently I helped someone propose up there!"

This is in addition to his obligations as a Sinfonian, where he has been very active. "Alpha Rho has been a huge source of both seen and unseen strength for me in college. They've gone out of their way to attend many of my talks and even helped sponsor a fundraiser for Camp Twitch and Shout. I'm very thankful to have found Sinfonia." Brother **John Brian Heath, Zeta Psi (East Carolina) '89**, who heads the Music Advocacy Committee that recently released its Guide to Music Advocacy, has been a friend of Crosa and an admirer of his spirit. "Ever since I met Crosa his freshman year, he has always been full of enthusiasm for all things musical. He is always eager to expand his musicality in ways that bring encouragement to those around him. And he's been a great help to me in several Fraternity projects in which I have been involved, including the development of the [Advocacy] Guide." Last year, Crosa received Province 20's Collegiate Brother of the Year Award in recognition of his dedication and brotherliness.

And though his path now takes him away from UNC and college life, it's clear that Crosa's experiences have helped him develop a strong character and an inviting and generous personality. His next stop will actually be to India for a summer internship with a sitar maker. After that, he'll be attending Texas A&M University for his Masters degree in Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education. But his legacy at UNC is one that will not be soon forgotten, even in ways that not all are aware of. "The Sinfonian Hymn is secretly programmed into the bell tower," he relates conspiratorially. "It's not labeled, and anytime someone asks we say that it's a hymn called 'Take Up Thy Cross.'"

National Tourette Syndrome Awareness Month is May 15 - June 15 - more information can be found at [tsa-usa.org](http://tsa-usa.org)!