

A doctor and a storyteller: how local forensic psychiatrist is using his voice to approach justice

"I think I was always really drawn to forensic psychiatry..."

the prologue:

The way he described it, it felt like the opening scene to a feature film. It was so easy to imagine. You could audibly hear a clock chime, a time considered late for a young boy awake past his bedtime. Another night up late enough to witness his mother ironing clothes for the next morning. The 'X Files' theme music was commonplace. In hindsight, it was sort of a soundtrack to his own future, a career with an office located beyond a full body scanner and an airport-style metal detector.

His eyes shimmer beneath his thick frames. It's almost impossible not to lean in closer, a physical manifestation of the phrase 'hanging off every word'. This deep-seated passion for his work, he describes, has been a long time coming.

... "I've just always been really interested in the 'what does it take?' What's the backstory to lead to this?" ...

setting the scene:

Having the title 'doctor' in front of your name is practically a trend in the Quinn family. Dr. Jason Quinn, a forensic psychiatrist at St. Joseph's Hospital in St. Thomas, is part of a family tree that could very well have stethoscopes for branches. His father, a retired ophthalmology veterinarian, his mother a family doctor. The oldest of four siblings, Dr. Quinn led the pack by choosing to take the medical route. His brother and one sister are both physicians, his other sister works as a physiotherapist.

Born and raised in Ilderton, the 20 minute commute to London was second nature to him. While completing his biology degree at Western, Dr. Quinn planned early on to aim for medical school. It wasn't until med school that he was really introduced to the field of psychiatry. He explains how he really values the work general psychiatrists do for their patients, but it just wasn't quite what he felt compelled to pursue.

"What I had always been interested in are characters in fantasy novels, horror films," he said. "I think this is why I was really drawn to forensic psychiatry."

When you hear the words 'forensic psychiatrist', many ideas may come to mind. The word 'storytelling', however, may not be at the forefront. For Dr. Quinn, one of the most compelling aspects of his line of work is the chance to be the voice for those who aren't often given the chance to tell their own stories. He likens the sensation of meeting a patient for the first time to

watching the opening scene in a TV show. “It isn’t until you watch the whole episode that you learn everything that led up to that point.”

...“And these stories go back really far. Sometimes it’s like fate before the person is even born... that this is going to happen”...

the storyteller:

When it comes to telling a compelling story, whether it be in the form of oral testimony on the stand or through a 50 page report, Dr. Quinn makes it a priority to get what he calls a “360 view” of both the individual and the offence. This could mean reviewing hours of witness testimony, reading police reports, or examining security footage. He recognizes that all people, just like characters in a story, are complex and layered.

Mr. Kent Lewis, the director of St. Joseph’s Healthcare London was eager to recognize Dr. Quinn’s gift for seeing beyond the surface of his patients, for seeing them as people with something to offer. “There is so much skill and strength and knowledge within our patients and Jason sees this. He recognizes that we have to see the person, the whole person in order to care for them.”

The work of a forensic psychiatrist is a multidimensional profession with many roles. Dr. Quinn feels that forensics isn’t for everyone, specifically because of the pressure when testifying in court. He has acted as an expert witness for both the crown and the defence a couple dozen times throughout his career. One case in particular, the Robert Charnock case, was one of contention in the media. Dr. Quinn testified on behalf of the crown that the defendant was ‘malingering’, or faking symptoms to avoid a prison sentence. Another psychiatrist testified in favour of Charnock not being held criminally responsible due to his schizophrenia. *How does Dr. Quinn ensure he remains unbiased when working on certain cases? Why can these discrepancies in opinion occur?*

While he recognizes that these differences in opinion are a reality of his work, he acknowledges that this is often a result of different parties having access to different information. It isn’t a matter of what ‘side’ he is testifying for. He actively tries to split his time between cases for both the crown and defence to minimize any biases. “As expert witnesses in Canada, we’re supposed to be neutral. I’m just trying to serve the court. It’s not helping either side to lie.” He also has no shame in changing his opinion as a trial progresses and more evidence is admitted into court. “In TV, it might look like experts are really gunning for one side. That’s just not how I see my role.”

the second character arc:

Some of the most compelling characters in books or films are the ones who evolve. Another aspect of the work Dr. Quinn thoroughly enjoys is what he refers to as the “second arc” of a patient’s story. At this point in time, they have been found guilty of an offence. Now they have the opportunity for redemption. “I think it’s this contrast that I love. You can have such a great

redemption arc and such a great story of recovery for these individuals. It allows me to have both the detective 'figure it out' lens as well as the doctor lens," he says. "I still get to help these people to some degree."

But what does Dr. Quinn view as the true value in forensic psychiatry? He wants the public to know that those who graduate from a forensic mental health program are significantly less likely to reoffend. They are often much more successful, he says, in reintegrating themselves into the community than those with the same mental health challenges facing prison sentences. Dr. Quinn also prides himself in the meaningful work he and his colleagues have done to educate correction officers on how to effectively treat and support inmates with mental illness. "As a physician, it's our job to meet people where they're at. So whether or not I think jails are rational or ethical, I can park that thought and instead focus on how I can improve the lives of individuals in jail experiencing these challenges."

His office is lined with what could be described as a psychology starter pack. The DSM-5 is placed neatly alongside what appears to be some sort of Psychology and the Law textbook. If you let your curious eyes wander long enough, though, you get a glimpse of a little Easter egg of humility, a window into the life he leads outside of the office. A little picture of a red house etched in thin-tip marker is displayed proudly. Dr. Quinn is also a husband, a father to two young girls, and a friend.

Work life balance is essential to physicians who, as he describes it, "work at the nexus of human suffering." For him, camping trips with family, the art of photography, and wearing many hats (guitar, piano, and occasional singer!) in a rock band add purpose to his life. Hobbies like these allow for some much-needed distance from the sometimes emotionally taxing work.

Director Kent Lewis was quick to acknowledge Quinn as someone who is multi-talented. "Sometimes you see physicians who are just book smart, but Jason is just so dynamic. It's pretty impressive to raise a family, have so many hobbies on the side, and set a balance," he said. The joy when speaking to Dr. Quinn's ability to juggle so many skills sang through the phone. "I think this really affects his ability to understand people... and it's this that shapes his practice."

When he isn't telling the stories of others on a witness stand or writing his own stories by making memories with loved ones, he is helping shape the stories of aspiring physicians. Since starting at St. Joseph's in 2018, he has consistently mentored residents through Western. He also occasionally lectures, further sharing his passion with the next generation.

The walk back to the front entrance was in some ways one of the most telling parts of meeting Dr. Quinn. In the common area for patients, an echo of appreciation rang through the lobby.

"Hey Dr. Quinn!" "You're the man!"