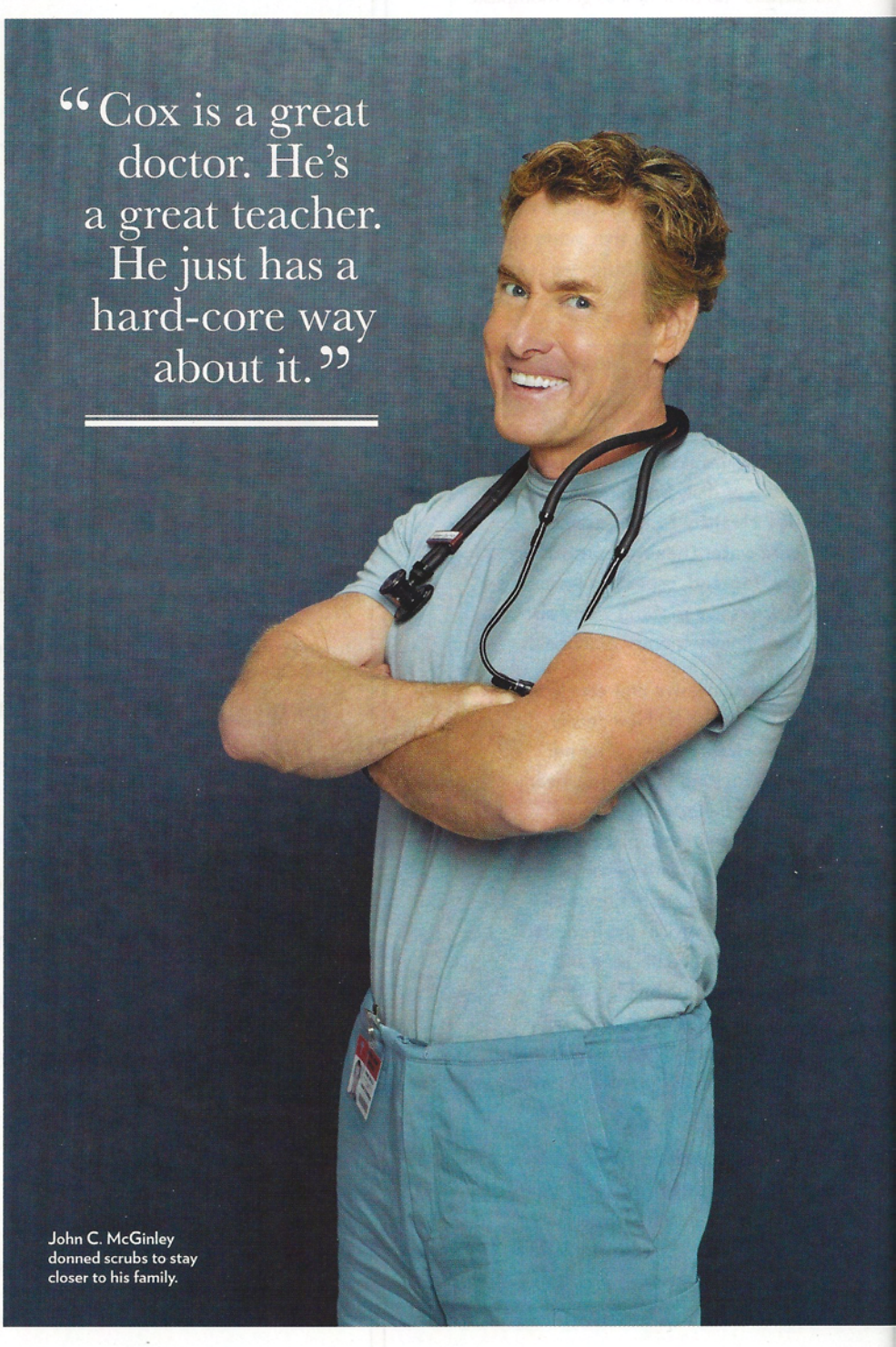
Man of Character

John C. McGinley might play most emotionally twisted character in prime time (Dr. Cox on *Scrubs*), but when he takes off his lab coat, he resumes his favorite part: dedicated dad.

BY PATTI VERBANAS



"Cox is a great doctor. He's a great teacher. He just has a hard-core way about it."

John C. McGinley donned scrubs to stay closer to his family.

BEFORE HIS GIG AS THE SARCASTIC, fast-talking, tough-loving Dr. Cox on *Scrubs*, character actor John C. McGinley was already a face you might recognize. His prolific career spans Broadway, television, commercials, and movies, including roles in six Oliver Stone films. Although he traded Short Hills for Malibu to strike a balance between work and family, McGinley is still very much a New Jersey soul and evokes his own childhood as a foundation for his strong relationship with his 11-year-old son, Max, who was born with Down syndrome, and his 1-year-old daughter, Billie Grace. For McGinley, the spokesman for the National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) and zealous advocate for children with special needs, family comes first. *New Jersey Life* caught up with him on the occasion of his 30th high school reunion, and we talked about his struggles as a working actor who also wants to be an active father — and how the Dr. Cox role was the answer to his prayers.

How often do you return home?

We've been doing *Scrubs* for eight years, so there are a lot of press opportunities that avail themselves of traveling back East, like for Letterman, Conan O'Brien, or the *Today* show. When I go back for press, I always weave in a little trip to Short Hills. I was in the Millburn public school system for all but two years — seventh and eighth grades, when I went to Delbarton in Morristown. I was in the class of 1978 at Millburn High School.

What is your favorite New Jersey haunt?
My mother's kitchen. My mother and father still live in the house where I grew up.

What was your childhood in Short Hills like?
It was really pretty great, to tell you the truth, a kind of Norman Rockwell idealism: Kids could ride their bike to school without question. After school, we either had an activity or we rode our bikes back home. My mother was a second-grade teacher at Pingry for about 25 years, and she wasn't always available to cater to everybody in the house — and she didn't want to cater to everybody in the house. We weren't allowed back until dark. We were to be engaged in something, whether it was football or tag or hide-and-seek or baseball or mowing lawns or shoveling snow. We were all jocks, and if we weren't running and competing, we were just playing.

How did you discover acting?
I wanted to be a kind of Bob Costas–Marv Albert radio personality. I transferred from Ohio Wesleyan to Syracuse and audited some classes at the Newhouse School. Then I audited an acting class and realized acting was clearly what I wanted to do. I transferred to NYU, but the undergrad program was a zoo, so I took a risk and applied to the graduate program as a junior. They accept only two juniors a year, and they accepted Eriq La Salle [Dr. Peter Benton on *ER*] and me. There was a bit of risk involved: It's a three-year program, and every year they kick out 15 students. So if you get kicked out after the first year, you would have gone to four years of college without a degree. But if you make it through the second year, they'll give you a B.F.A., and if you make it through the third year, they'll give you an M.F.A. I'm extremely proud to say that I made it through all three years. It was absolutely acting boot camp for those three years. Eriq and I ate, slept, and drank at Second Avenue and Seventh Street. We never left.

What was your big break?
I got the understudy job for the great American actor John Turturro in John Patrick Shanley's two-person play *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*. I was also the assistant stage manager. When John left for a couple of days to film the Madonna movie *Desperately Seeking Susan*, I took over for him. An associate of Oliver Stone who was casting this low-budget independent film *Platoon* came to see John Turturro but saw me instead and invited me to audition for a role in *Platoon*. That's how I started my relationship with Oliver Stone.

What is it like to work for Oliver Stone?
It is heaven. He has a laserlike vision for the story he wants to tell and the composition of how the narrative is going to unfold, and if you can fit into that vision, you have no problem.

What has been your favorite role?
Dr. Cox. Bill Lawrence, the executive producer, based Cox on his wife's father, who was a pretty hard-core teaching doctor in New York City. The funniest thing on the outline of the casting invitation that went out to all the agencies was, in parentheses, "Looking for a John McGinley type." So when I went to audition I said, "Well, I'm here!" And I *still* had to audition six times, because in TV, there are so many chefs in the kitchen. Disney was the producer and NBC was the exhibitor, and everybody gets a vote. "But," I said, "I'm the guy in *the parentheses*!"

McGinley with his son, Max.

Why do you think you weren't more of a shoo-in to play Dr. Cox?
A lot of people wanted to play that role. It was very competitive. I tanked the audition at Disney, but they still brought me back to the final audition at NBC. I was liberated by stinking in front of the Disney people. I knew I wouldn't do that again. I went in to audition for about 30 different executives in a room that was claustrophobic, and I crushed it. I couldn't have possibly done anything any better. I'm very centered when I'm in an audition waiting room, watching actors come out like deer in the headlights. When people ➡

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panic it makes me go the other way. I do very well in chaos. I had a Mustang — a real Jersey muscle car — at the time, and when I left, I put the top down, blared Springsteen, and thought, *My God, this was the best audition*. When I got home the phone started ringing off the hook. They wanted to put me in *Scrubs*. I was thrilled. Max was 2, and I wanted to be a huge part of my son's life. As a character actor if you are lucky enough to get two or three films a year and go to some exotic location for three or four months, you can't be any part of your son's life. *Scrubs* allowed me to be a working actor in Los Angeles doing something I was proud of and spend the maximum amount of time with my son.

How much creative license do you have with Dr. Cox?

Because Cox is the most damaged character in prime time and because writers can write damaged characters the best, the pages I got were pretty spot-on. I just sprinkle a little Johnny C. in there and shoot. I feel like Cox is an archetypal descendent of two characters who resonate for me: Danny DeVito's Louie De Palma on *Taxi* and Ed Asner's Lou Grant on *Mary Tyler Moore*. Think of it this way: If everything had gone wrong for Mary and she was in Lou's office and needed a hug, he'd give her a hug as long as she promised she wouldn't tell anybody that he did something nice. Cox should be along those lines. I want him to teach with a spoonful of dirt and then a teaspoon of sugar. I write out all the scripts in composition notebooks to let them become mine. In the beginning of these composition books I write four qualities: Show up, give love, tell the truth, and give compassion. These are important because the minute Cox descends into being a big-time jackass, who cares about him? For me, what makes Cox compelling is his compassion. Cox is a great doctor. He's a great teacher. He just has a hard-core way about it. With Max in mind, I try to find a beat or a scene in every script where Cox can give compas-

> "What makes Cox compelling is his compassion."

sion — even if it's deep inside and the camera doesn't see it.

Tell us about your work with the National Down Syndrome Society.
I handle the Buddy Walk for them and advocate to elevate the public's awareness of kids with special needs. Every weekend in October, which is National Down Syndrome Month, there are about 250 Buddy Walks. I go to as many different cities as I can.

How has the quality of life changed for people with Down syndrome?
Their life expectancy has shot up to 60, which is astonishing because 15 years ago it was 30. The advent of nutritional intervention and chat rooms and the presence of organizations like the NDSS and advocacy groups have helped give information and assistance to parents of children with special needs.

What is the main challenge for a parent of a special-needs child?
When you have a kid born with special needs you have been blessed by God with an opportunity to be a great parent, because you're going to have to be. You have been given an opportunity to get involved. And that's what I see at the Buddy Walks: whole neighborhoods coming out to support them. It's a throwback to cultures where the tribe surrounded the child. It's astonishing. NJL

NJL *Visit newjerseylife.com for an extended interview with John C. McGinley. For more on the National Down Syndrome Society, visit ndss.org.*

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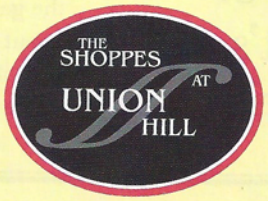

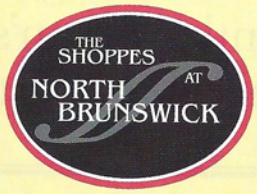

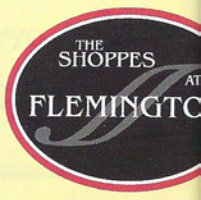

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