

{Madison Legacies}

# Fifteen and counting

*The Comer family's Madison tradition* BY MARTHA BELL GRAHAM

**D**ecember commencement was a very special event for Brownie Comer Cave ('39) as she watched her granddaughter Juliana Comer ('09) receive her bachelor's degree. For Brownie and Juliana, Madison is a family tradition. Brownie is one of eight sisters from Shenandoah, Va., who graduated from Madison in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. While attending Madison, Brownie taught swimming and worked as a lifeguard at the Keezell Hall pool — which surprised Juliana, who didn't know that the classroom with the slanted floor in the basement of Keezell Hall was once a pool. To help pay tuition, Brownie lived with her sister, Mary, in Harrisonburg and worked at a downtown restaurant. Together, Brownie and her seven sisters earned seven teaching degrees and one nursing degree. Brownie returned to school in 1966 and earned a master's degree from the University of Virginia.

With Juliana's graduation, the Comer's Madison tradition continues. Although Juliana was a finalist for a Jefferson Scholarship at U.Va., she chose JMU for the hands-on approach of faculty members in the JMU School of Media Arts and Design. Fol-



(Above): "SMADuate" Juliana Comer ('09) shows off her mortarboard following 2009 Winter Commencement ceremonies. (Right): The graduate joins grandmother Brownie Comer Cave ('39) and mother Rosemary Cave Comer ('71) and her brother Jonathan Comer.



lowing graduation, she worked in Sen. Mark Obenshain's office during the 2010 Virginia General Assembly session and hopes to pursue a career in television journalism.

Brownie's parents Fannie and Frank Comer's belief in the value of education has influenced several generations. "In our family, education was always assumed," Brownie says of the philosophy she passed on to her daughter Rosemary Cave Comer ('71), Juliana's mother. Rosemary was one of the first Madison graduates to receive a degree in elementary education, and like her mother and most of her aunts, she went on to teach. Brownie wasn't surprised. "My children saw me grad-

ing papers until midnight." It was a demonstration of how the Comers succeeded. "Work at it ... that's the only thing that works. You've got to work at it," she says.

All in all, Rosemary counts 15 family members as Madison graduates. But the tradition doesn't end with Juliana. Two of her cousins are currently enrolled at JMU.

Stay tuned. **M**

**'Brownie's parents Fannie and Frank Comer's belief in the value of education has influenced several generations. In our family, education was always assumed.'**

— BROWNIE COMER CAVE ('39)

AlumniNews

Stay in the know, get *Madison*

# Madison

**Want to read Madison online?**

To receive *Madison* electronically, keep your e-mail address up to date with JMU.  
Log on and share your e-mail at [www.jmu.edu/madisononline/emailme.shtml](http://www.jmu.edu/madisononline/emailme.shtml)