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## Beyond the classroom

*Award-winning teacher prepares students for life* BY HALI CHIET ('07)

**H**eather Schwarz of Dumfries, Va., has accomplished a great deal as a first-year teacher at Stafford High School. In addition to teaching students with autism, making a difference in the lives of her students and taking courses to complete a graduate certificate, Schwarz is the first-ever recipient of the Heather M. Empfield Scholarship in Autism.

The \$1,000 scholarship honors a former autism program coordinator for the Stafford County school system who passed away in May 2009. The award is a professional development scholarship to help pay for continued study in autism. "I was shocked, excited and honored when I found out the good news," says Schwarz, who is using the money for a graduate certificate in teaching students with autism. She is taking the course online through the University of Mary Washington.

"As a first-year teacher, I didn't have too much experience working with students with autism," she says. "I'm excited to complete this graduate certificate so I can learn new strategies and ideas and better myself as a teacher."

Schwarz is currently the only teacher of students with autism at Stafford High School, where she is in charge of a class of ninth- and 10th-graders. "Our classroom is very structured because my students like having a routine," she says. Schwarz begins each day by having her students work on social skills – making eye contact, practicing greetings and interacting with one another – in addition to writing in a journal. The journal maps out the day's schedule, so if something differs from their routine, Schwarz helps prepare her students for change. "Teaching flexibility is important because my students struggle with that concept."



**Heather Schwarz ('08, '09M), an award-winning teacher of students with autism, says, "I absolutely love my job. I couldn't imagine doing anything else."**

The remainder of the school day includes working on various life skills like laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, as well as job skills like working at a food bank once a week. "My main focus is on preparing students for life after school," says Schwarz, who takes her students into the community twice a week to expose them to everyday experiences.

Schwarz can see that she is making a difference in her students' lives. "After my first school year ended, I saw a lot of improvement in many areas that my students initially struggled with."

Schwarz says she chose JMU knowing that she wanted to teach, but she wasn't sure what grade level or subject area she wanted to specialize in. She discovered her passion for helping those with special needs through her many extracurricular and volunteer activities. She was a member of the service fraternity APO; Best Buddies, an organization in which JMU students develop friendships with adults with disabilities; and Big Brothers Big Sisters, an organization where students serve as mentors to local children.

"Big Brothers Big Sisters was one of the best parts of my Madison Experience," says Schwarz, who had three little buddies she devoted several hours to each week. "I really felt like I made a difference in the lives of these kids."

In addition to her experiences outside the classroom, Schwarz says JMU's education and graduate programs gave her a solid foundation for her career. "I had outstanding professors who made me realize what kind of teacher I wanted to be," she says. "Education professor Melinda Burchard is an excellent role model and mentor. She's a positive and compassionate person. She has such great ideas and always shares positive feedback." ❧