

## TRANSFORMATIONS

## Trisha Smith's journey back

*After a frightening, life-changing day, freshman adjusts to AVM and sets ambitious goals*

BY LISL MAGBOO ('12) AND PAULA POLGLASE ('92, '96M)

Sitting next to freshman Trisha Smith in class, you might notice her brown, curly hair, her casual style or the way she concentrates on the professor. Smith looks like an average JMU freshman.

She is not. Smith is trying to concentrate, but it is hard. The potential for recurring Arterio-Venous Malformation and seizure activity in her brain engulfs her thoughts. "Every day is a new barrier to overcome," says Smith.

The fall 2009 semester was coming to an end as Smith prepared for the upcoming week of finals. She found it difficult to stay focused and concentrate on her work. Blurry vision, slurred speech and loss of feeling on the left side of her body ensued, a combination of symptoms Smith never recalled experiencing before.

Based on her roommate's intense concern, Smith was rushed to the hospital where she was quickly diagnosed with a brain AVM, a tangle of abnormal arteries and veins that had burst and were bleeding in her brain. She now knows the facts: 50 percent of people who have a brain AVM bleed do not survive. The survivors almost always have some form of disability.

After two weeks in various hospitals in Virginia, Smith relocated to Germany, where her parents live. Smith was admitted to a rehabilitation center to recover from the aftermath of the AVM bleed: stroke-like symptoms, residual blood swelling in the brain, poor visual perception and loss of coordination.

"For awhile, I couldn't shower or use the bathroom by myself. I was in a wheelchair because of poor stability, with a helmet strapped to my head for protection," Smith says.

The rapid occurrence of events that fateful day in December left Smith with emotional issues to overcome as well. Confused and frustrated, the thought of "Why me?" constantly echoed in her mind. "I felt like I was living my last day with each day that passed because everything was happening so fast," she says.

**About the Authors** Paula Polglase ('92, '96M) and Lisl Magboo ('12) work together in the JMU Office of Public Affairs. Magboo, a public relations major and computer information systems minor, is an intern. This year she has exercised her writing skills, contributing to stories on the Wayland Hall renovations, Saferides, Venture Creation and Relay for Life. Magboo is managing editor for the JMU yearbook, Bluestone, and is pursuing a summer internship in the public relations field.

Although not 100 percent back to her pre-AVM self, Smith was ready to return to JMU in fall 2010 to repeat her first semester. She takes multiple medications, suffers short-term memory loss, has vision problems that impede her ability to obtain a driver's license and fights depression.

Recognizing that she could not succeed on her own, Smith sought help to ease back into school. Vision and class accommodations, note-taking assistance, stress-management training and learning-style assessments provided by the JMU Office of Disability Services have helped Smith rebound academically.

"We can be proactive in removing barriers, reducing stigma, and creating more accessible and welcoming environments together," says ODS director Valerie Schoolcraft.

While Smith was on the road to recovery, her counselor recommended creating video documentaries. Smith's latest video, *The Appointment*, received distinguished recognition at the American Academy of Neurology's annual film festival.

A screening of the video and panel discussion took place at JMU during Disability Awareness Week in April, which was sponsored by ODS. "I was glad that ODS gave me the opportunity to

have this event, to share my story and to spread awareness of both disabilities and brain injury," Smith says. "I definitely think it was something students and faculty needed to hear."

When asked about her decision to return to JMU, Smith says, "I really couldn't see myself doing anything else. I envisioned something bigger for myself and knew I had to come back to accomplish my goals."

"Trish is incredibly self-determined and is a positive self-advocate," Schoolcraft says. "I admire and respect her passion to press on, to share her story in her own voice, in her own way, in the hope that we can all understand and support one another better."

Smith has not let her medical condition cloud her goals and dreams as a student. Previously a law enforcement major, now a psychology major, Smith has made it a personal goal to help others who are struggling. "I want to provide others with the kind of support I have received," Smith says. "I want to help people the way others have helped me."

\* Watch Smith's video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8ccsP2ziNQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8ccsP2ziNQ)



Trisha Smith ('14), center, reunites with Brooke Powell ('13), her 2009 freshman roommate, and Powell's mother, Beth, who insisted that her daughter check on Smith and call 911. That call most likely saved her life. Smith suffered a brain AVM bleed (right) in December 2009 while studying for exams.

