

## Brianne Applegate: A New Outlook on Life

Rider University student Brianne Applegate spends a good portion of her days at the University library studying. It's certainly not unusual for a student to be knee-deep in textbooks and notes this time of year, but few have learned to appreciate learning as much as Brianne. After sustaining a brain injury only 10 months ago, this 23-year-old has returned to her studies with an entirely new outlook on life.

"It's amazing how humble you become," Brianne says, explaining how her life is completely different than it was as little as one year ago. "You learn to appreciate everything you have."

In a library full of students Brianne fits in. She's young, energetic, and friendly. She likes learning and is ready for whatever life throws at her. But Brianne isn't just another college student. She has been through quite a lot over the last year. As a result of her injury earlier this year, she had to take a leave of absence from classes while she went through months of rehabilitation.

She has recently returned to school for two independent study courses. She says her Dean and professors have been very accommodating and understanding. She is involved in theater, something she was passionate about before her injury, but she cannot sing anymore because her vocal cords were damaged in the accident.

Her ability to learn has also been affected by her injury. It's hard for her to remember things, and the slightest little distractions can ruin her concentration. Sometimes she has to read things 5 or 6 times before fully grasping the subject matter. But Brianne, doesn't get frustrated--she knows she has come a long way the last couple of months.

February 1, 2008 is a date Brianne will always remember. She started the day on campus bright and early, arriving to practice for auditions to the school musical. She was a Dean's List student; a music theater major with a love for singing and acting, and was hoping to get a role in the school's play. After practice she headed for her home in New Hope, PA. It was the middle of the day, but it was raining out and the roads were slippery. Brianne's vehicle hydroplaned and she lost control. It went off the roadway and down a ravine, spinning 180 degrees and crashing into several trees. She was thrown from her seat and struck her head on the windshield. She sustained frontal lobe damage to her brain, fractured the C2 vertebra (axis) in her neck, broke four ribs on her left side, and punctured a lung.

After the accident Brianne was unconscious in her car for about an hour. Cars passed by, but no one stopped--perhaps because no one noticed her since she was down in the ravine. After waking



up she somehow managed to get up to the side of the roadway to flag down a car for help. Emergency services were contacted and she was taken to Saint Mary's Hospital in Passaic. She spent the next three weeks in the hospital and later underwent a rehabilitation program for seven months.

"The people that helped me were incredible," she said. "I had to re-learn so many things. At first I couldn't even walk or talk. I remember trying to do something as simple as drawing a triangle and it was difficult. Thankfully there were people there to help me through it all."

It wasn't just the rehabilitation that Brianne credits for her improvements. "My family is the very best in the world," she explained. "My mom didn't leave my side for a single second. If it wasn't for my family I don't think I would have made it."

With brain injury hitting so close to home, the Applegate family has become involved with the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey. Most recently, they took part in the Walk for Thought Cycle for Safety. Brianne says she hopes to continue to be involved with the Association in the future. She also says she would like to one day work with individuals with brain injury. She hopes to now study speech pathology and eventually find a career at a rehabilitation center where she can help others.

Everything that Brianne has been through over the last several months have made her a much stronger, more appreciative individual, she says. "You never think something like this is going to happen to you," she explains. "But it did. And I feel like it all happened for a reason. I don't know what God's plan for me is, but I'm going through it right now."