

## Memorial gifts create lasting tribute to CMU student

When Central Michigan University sophomore **Joanna M. Russ** was tragically killed in an automobile accident on Mar. 11, 2004, her family and friends knew they couldn't let her efforts in conducting research to help children with disabilities fade away.

In a lasting tribute to Joanna, they established the **Joanna M. Russ Memorial Undergraduate Research and Presentation Grant** through memorial gifts designated to CMU, including substantial gifts from psychology department faculty members and Joanna's parents, Walter and Annie Russ.

The annual grant will help offset students' costs of conducting research or presenting the results of their projects.

Joanna, a psychology major, wanted to become a psychologist and work with special needs children and their families. She was especially interested in helping children with autism.

"When Joanna was in high school, she worked with a set of autistic toddlers to fulfill her National Honor Society community service hours," said Annie Russ. "She did very well with them, and it just came naturally to her. She would think about things such as what color shirt to wear to get the kids to respond, and she had good luck with it."

Joanna started taking classes at CMU in the fall of 2002, but was unhappy with the lack of activities to keep her engaged.

"She was a very driven, straight-A student, so she needed a lot of activity and stimulation," said Annie.

Looking for a way to get Joanna more involved in university programs, Mike Owens, CMU's associate dean of students, introduced her to psychology professor Tim Hartshorne.

"Joanna was very interested in autism and severe disabilities, so I asked her to join my research team to study CHARGE syndrome," said Hartshorne, who was in the midst of conducting two simultaneous studies funded by the CHARGE Syndrome Foundation.

"CHARGE syndrome is a relatively rare condition (1 in 12,000 births is an estimate) that was first identified in 1979. Some of the children with CHARGE display behavior that can be classified as autistic, obsessive compulsive, attention deficit hyperactivity and tic disorder," said Hartshorne.

"The major challenges with CHARGE are vision and hearing problems resulting in many children being classified as deafblind; swallowing problems leading to the need for feeding tubes; balance problems causing significant delays in learning to walk; and communication difficulties related to the deafblindness."

"Joanna made a big contribution to our study by getting us to include questions on communication. She wondered whether communication skills development and/or the method of communication used by the child influenced behavior or sensory processing. We have found that communication skill problems are related to more severe behavior difficulties," said Hartshorne.

The Joanna Russ research and presentation grant is open to CMU students of all academic majors. Research related to CHARGE syndrome will be given priority, but projects can fall under any of the following categories:

- The cause of or nature of behavior difficulties in children with CHARGE syndrome;
- Educational, family, medical, social or other difficulties experienced by children with CHARGE syndrome or other genetic syndromes;
- Studies related to autism and autism spectrum disorder;
- Studies related to other low incidence disabilities such as deafblindness.

Applicants for the grant must have a minimum 3.0 GPA and present evidence of faculty sponsorship. The psychology department will select the number of recipients and amount awarded each year.



**Joanna Russ**

Although the loss is unbelievably hard, Annie said the family is comforted by the many letters they've received from Joanna's friends, teachers and the special needs children and families that she worked with.

"We had no idea that she had touched so many lives, that her influence on others was so encompassing."

The family also finds comfort in knowing that Joanna's compassion for helping special needs children will be carried on by other students at CMU.

"It started out as an in lieu of flowers. We had no idea it would develop into something this big," said Annie. "My husband's co-workers held fundraisers and raffles to raise more than \$3,500. Joanna's high school and college friends and teachers, her roommate's family, and the family of the children Joanna babysat all emptied their pockets to help out."

"Joanna's love for others will live on forever in so many hearts and minds, and it's her love that created all of this. Her spirit, her life, everything that she wanted to do will live on in her scholarship."

Anyone interested in making a contribution to the Russ memorial fund should contact the CHSBS development office at **(989) 774-1788** or [CHSBS@cmich.edu](mailto:CHSBS@cmich.edu).