

## Palomar College Creative Writing Student Wins

### *Gene Jackson Spirit of Writing Award*

*Bravura* Literary Magazine and Creative Writing Classes Inspire Accident Victim

By Melinda Finn



**Matthew and Kim Carlin**

Two years ago, after being in a coma for seven weeks, then 20-year-old Matthew Carlin said to his mother, Kim Carlin, “Bring me something to read.”

“It was like a voice from heaven,” Kim said, “... the first spontaneous and complete sentence he had spoken since the accident.” She was recounting that day in the nursing home where her son was transferred after undergoing surgery to relieve pressure on his brain, resulting from injuries he suffered in a car accident in June 2008.

Kim had been visiting Matthew in the hospital and then in the nursing home every day - and every day she would read to him. That particular day she recalled being somewhere in the middle of *The Green Mile* by Stephen King, when Matthew’s voice stopped her in her tracks. Responding to his request, she went out to her car and brought him a magazine. At that time he was unable to read, but he was able to thumb through the magazine and look at the pictures. That day was just one of several remarkable turning points for Matthew, now 22, who was given a slim chance of meaningful recovery shortly after the accident which left him with a “diffuse axonal” brain injury. In this type of injury, Kim explained, the brain rotates inside the skull, tearing connections in a number of areas in the brain and affecting multiple physical and cognitive functions.

Matthew, who had been a student at Palomar College prior to the accident, continued to recover slowly, relearning some of the basic skills most of us take for granted – like walking and talking and putting a fork to his mouth. With each achievement he got further and further away from that original grim prognosis and closer to the possibility – turning into reality – that despite his challenges he could have a meaningful future.

Several months after the accident, Matthew began to speak of Rocco Versaci, his former Palomar College creative writing professor. Kim, who had not known of Versaci before the accident, wondered whether her son had made up that name – maybe even made up that person – but was delighted to find out not only that Rocco Versaci was real, but that her son had a memory of his experience in Versaci’s class. “I remembered Rocco & Carlton [Smith],” Matthew recently said. Versaci and Smith co-teach the *Bravura* Literary Magazine class at Palomar that Matthew had previously taken. He now wanted to go back to school and take creative writing and to again be part of the *Bravura* class.

Matthew’s positive memory of his experiences with writing and *Bravura* were especially significant considering the memory loss, both short-term and long-term, which his mother described as “one of the biggest challenges” resulting from his brain injury. Kim explained that Matthew’s memory is unpredictable, or “hit and miss” – while he may not remember something like brushing his teeth a few minutes ago, sometimes he surprises her by remembering people or events that she has forgotten. Matthew elaborated, “It’s like every *other* page of my life story is ripped out.”

While Matthew was in the hospital, Kim Carlin and her husband Keith discovered a number of his writings at home on his computer and in notebooks. “The stories were good,” Kim said, describing the genre as mostly “dark science fiction and fantasy...We never realized before how serious a writer he was. It was a hidden treasure.” A year to the day after the accident, Matthew had recovered enough physically and mentally to return to Palomar for the summer 2009 semester, where he took an Adaptive Computing class and a Horseback Riding workshop. Assisted by the College’s Disability Resource Center and with his mom as note-taker, he took creative writing with Versaci in the fall, and continued in the spring semester, adding the *Bravura* class.

Matthew’s writing talent along with his determination and perseverance were recognized at the spring 2010 *Bravura* Gala in May, where he received the Gene Jackson Spirit of Writing Award for his short story, *Train of Thought*. Upon accepting the award, Matthew surprised his parents by addressing the audience not with the words he had rehearsed with them, but these words... “This story is about my accident recovery....if it’s confusing to read, it’s even more confusing to live.”

Now approaching the two-year anniversary of the accident, Matthew and his mother recently reflected on the way their lives and the lives of others have been altered since that day. Matthew no longer

has contact with the driver, a former close friend who received only minor injuries in the incident. Matthew's brother Shane, 21, who was also a passenger in the car, has recovered from injuries he suffered.

Kim said that after the accident she and her husband mutually decided she would leave her job working in Human Resources so that Matthew could have full-time care as long as he needs it. In addition to Matthew and Shane, the Carlins also have a 15-year-old daughter, Kelsey. When released from the hospital in December 08 Matthew was in a wheelchair. They modified their two-story home, converting the dining room into a temporary downstairs bedroom for Matthew, and until he could make it up the stairs, one of his parents spent every night by his side. Matthew, determined to reoccupy his upstairs bedroom, practiced walking up the stairs until he mastered it and has been staying there ever since.

Kim, who described herself as a type A personality, said she has learned through Matthew and the family's experience the last two years to be more patient, not only with Matthew, but with other people who might have hidden disabilities and/or brain injuries. For the time being, the focus is on helping her son move forward each day. "Our goal is for him to achieve his potential and live independently," she said.

Commenting on the colorful tattoos that cover Matthew's arms, his mother admitted that she made an offer to her son while he was still in the coma two years ago. At that time the tattoos consisted simply of black outlines of dragons. "If you come out of this, we'll have this filled in for you with color and I'll pay for it," she said. When Matthew woke up, she was more than happy to have to make good on her promise.

Now able to walk with the help of a walker, to speak slowly, and to type on a computer with his two index fingers, Matthew has developed a philosophical approach to his situation. One thing he knows is that writing is important to him, and his classes at Palomar made him aware of "so many options for stories" yet to be written. The accident and all that he has had to deal with have helped him to focus on what is important and to "disregard the small stuff." He said that he was glad that the accident happened when it did, rather than when he was younger or older. "Now I have to focus on what I want to do with my life."

When asked what he has learned that might help other young people, Matthew said, "Know what you're passionate about and embrace that fully, no matter what the obstacles."

**Bravura** is published annually by Palomar College. The President's Associates provide funds for the writing and visual awards as well as for the full-color cover and inside pages.

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