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The two sides of "Billy" Smith

His wheelchair and his challenges

By Barbara M. Simpson

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Imagine walking the day before, then going to bed and on rising your legs are numb, nothing, zilch.

That happened to Richard "Billy" Smith on June 10, 1987.

"The fright I felt at not being able to walk on awakening is indescribable."

He is now confined to a wheelchair, a paraplegic.

That has not stopped Billy Smith who was a participant in the New York City Marathon from going the full 26.2 miles course.

Smith was stricken with a rare malady, Arterio Venous Malformations which AVMs are congenital vascular malformations that

result from a localized.... development of part of the primitive vascular plexus and consist of abnormal arterio venous communications with intervening capillaries. AVMs usually strike its victims in the head and is usually fatal.

At first some doctors thought Smith had multiple sclerosis but it was the astuteness of the doctors at the Albert Einstein Hospital in The Bronx did a spinal tap which showed that Smith, who is built like a weight lifter, had AVM.

Richard Smith, a Kingston College graduate, born in Four Paths, Clarendon, was running a successful business when he was stricken.

He was an owner-operator of a tractor-trailer, which he bought in February 1985, hauling containers

throughout New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Baltimore. In October 1986 his legs started to become cramped and weak quite frequently but he attributed that to long sitting, climbing in and out of the tractor-trailer.

When he was diagnosed on June 10, 1987 with AVM, Smith remained in Einstein until August 31, 1987.

After he returned home he became a recluse and was only forced to leave the apartment six months later, February 1988 to go for his first doctor's appointment. He said that remaining inside for so many months made him realise that he was wallowing in self-pity.

"When I ventured outside to go to the hospital, I had forgotten how nice the crisp air felt and I also realised that there was a life for me even in a wheelchair."

From that moment, Smith said, he came to terms with his illness and has become involved in many things.

"I have my upper body and my head still works, so why should I worry? I see people with their two feet but no brains everyday," Smith stated.

Since 1988 "Billy" Smith has volunteered at the Spinal Chord Damage Research Centre doing whatever he can to assist the doctors, become an associate member of the Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA) and plays basketball with them on the EPVA court in New Jersey, played in a basketball tournament in South Carolina, Ohio, Florida, Puerto Rico and is learning to use the computer at the Veterans Hospital in the Bronx.

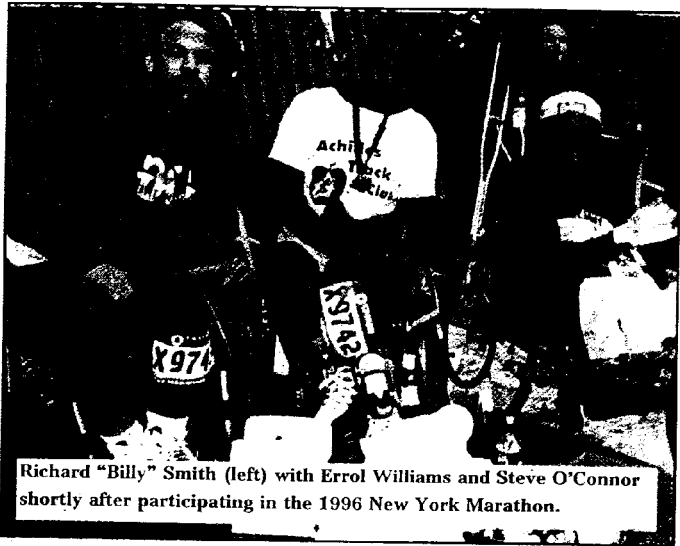
Achilles Club

But, it is his involvement in Achilles Club that has given him added impetus.

Dr. Charles Smith at Albee Einstein encouraged him to become a member of the Club which is headquartered in New York City and has chapters all over the world. The Achilles Club was founded in 1981 by an above-the-knee amputee Richard "Dick" Traum. The Club credo, "No pain, no gain," is a challenge to paraplegics all over the world.

When Smith became a member of the Achilles Club he was automatically entered in the 1996 New York City Marathon. He expressed the desire to start an Achilles Club in Jamaica at the Mona Rehabilitation Centre and tried to get two of the paraplegics from Mona to enter the 1996 Marathon. Traum approved and gave Smith two invitational letters from the Achilles Club for the American Embassy to issue visas for Steve O'Connor and Errol Williams. Air Jamaica donated their fare. Smith and his two partners trained at Central Park for the Marathon and when they participated in the 26 miles New York City Marathon, he said, "we had the flag of Jamaica on the backs of our chairs and when we went through Brooklyn, the crowd cheered us on with, "Go Jamaica!"

Smith is planning a fund raiser to purchase the proper running wheelchairs for the Mona Rehabilitation Centre. He said the ones the two participants used for the marathon were not the appropriate chairs and made it very difficult for them to compete



Richard "Billy" Smith (left) with Errol Williams and Steve O'Connor shortly after participating in the 1996 New York Marathon.