

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Trisha Meili

Interview by Kimberly Paetzold, Editor

Born in 1960, Trisha Meili was raised in Paramus, New Jersey and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She completed her undergraduate degree at Wellesley College and graduate studies at Yale University. After graduation, she went on to work as an associate at Salomon Brothers, a Wall Street investment bank.

On April 19, 1989, shortly after 9 p.m., Trisha went for a run in New York's Central Park. During her run, she was violently assaulted. Hours later, two men found her near death after being raped and beaten—she was in a coma, had a fierce blow to the head, severe hypothermia and 75 percent blood loss. The initial prognosis was that she would die or remain in a permanent coma.

Trisha miraculously survived the brutal beating and eventually returned to her



previous life and work while remaining out of the public eye for fourteen years. In 2003 Trisha told her story in a book titled "I AM THE CENTRAL PARK JOGGER: A Story of Hope and Possibility" (a New York Times best seller) and began a career as an inspirational speaker.

Thank you for interviewing with RainbowVisions. You have made a remarkable recovery and tried to turn what was a horrible experience into something positive. You write in your book that the attack ultimately has given you a richer and more meaningful life. Could you expand on this thought?

I have a much greater appreciation for what I do have – for life and all that surrounds me. To me, that increased awareness, appreciation and attitude make life so much richer. My work is more satisfying than the job I had before my injury.

During your inpatient residential rehabilitation, one of your doctors said that the brain isn't always automatically self-healing, but that it sometimes needs a push. Did you feel pushed by your rehabilitation team?

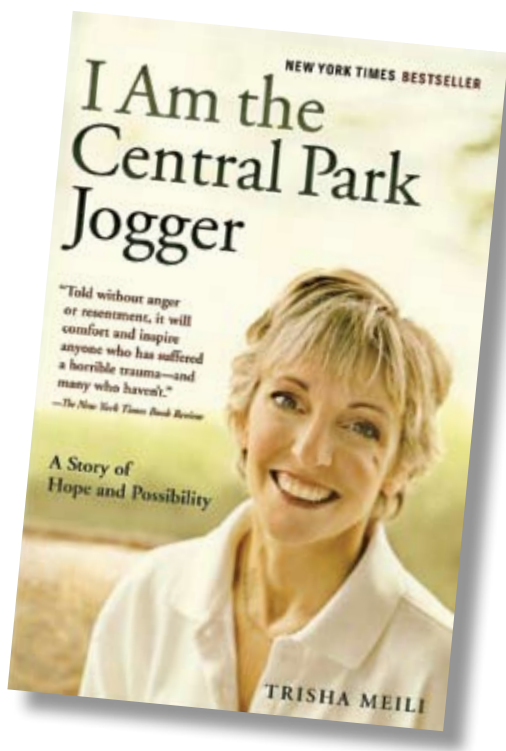
The answer to that question is yes, but they didn't push in an obnoxious way

because that would have turned me off. My therapists were as invested in my recovery as I was. As a team, we set goals together. The best example of that was when the head of the physical therapy department encouraged me to join a running group. I joined one Saturday, and I remember a man in a wheelchair as well as a young boy with spina bifida. I thought, "If they can do this with their disabilities then so can I." I wasn't in great shape at that time, but running gave me the sense that I could conquer the world. It filled me with such hope – like I was taking something back. In hindsight, I realize that my physical therapist knew just how much to push.

You worked very hard in therapy. At one point, you attended 35 one-hour group sessions of academics to bring you up to college reading level. Could you tell us how you motivated yourself for this?

I believe a couple of things were going on. Without being aware of it, I only focused on the present. In rehabilitation, concentration matters. I focused on the here and now very intently and worked as hard as I could to make my reality the best it could be. Almost instinctively, I realized that wallowing in the past or wishing for a different future was not going to help. Working in the present and focusing my energy eventually led to gradual improvements, however small. Those gains motivated me to keep pushing forward.

Improvement is a powerful reinforcement. I wasn't sure what I would be doing in the future, but I had a sense that I would be OK. That thought brought a sense of peace. It also helped that I was getting tremendously encouraging messages from around the world. People wanted me to get better – I can't tell you how powerful that was. Maybe unconsciously, that caused me to work harder.



You've always had a love for running. At some point during your recovery, your attitude about that activity changed.

Could you tell our readers about this?

I think the irony of my story is that my running compulsion nearly killed me, but it also helped save my life because I was in such good physical shape. One major change since my accident is that I no longer feel that I've wasted a day if I do not run. I still exercise a fair amount, several times a week, but in moderation. Running has become a vehicle for feeling proud of what I can do – but it's no longer a crutch.

Could you tell us what type of deficits you had to work around and what compensatory strategies you implemented?

I used a planner more and tried to follow established routines. If I stayed organized, I functioned better. When I was rushed or disorganized, the results were rarely optimal. I also got plenty of sleep. Lack of adequate rest still affects my mental abilities and that, combined with a healthy diet and regular exercise, helped quite a bit.

Your employer (Salomon Brothers) kept your job open and actually created a position better suited to your abilities and stage of recovery. Could you tell us about your job, post-injury, and how you gradually took on more responsibilities?

My employer played a vital role in my recovery. A job is part of an individual's identity. When that is suddenly gone, it becomes much harder to regain confidence and abilities. My employer stood by me from the beginning and let me know there was a place for me at work. Early on, they told my father, "Trisha will have a job whenever she gets out of the hospital." To be wanted and welcomed back gave me a sense of belonging and provided a tremendous psychological boost. It also increased my desire to work hard in rehabilitation so I could be professionally effective and productive.

When I returned to work, at first I didn't



Pictured above: In June 2004, Trisha Meili made a run through the streets of New York City carrying the Olympic torch. She was selected to represent New York in the Olympic Torch Relay.

have any client interaction, which was a large component of what I did pre-injury. Instead, I performed a fair amount of administrative tasks. For example, I set up a system to make sure that our corporate expenses were recovered. Gradually, I got more involved in different financial transactions and with clients. Later, I was able to travel and worked to a position that was fairly close to what I had been doing pre-injury.

My experience was similar to Bob Woodruff's current situation – Bob is back at ABC but not employed in the exact same position. (Pre-injury, Bob Woodruff

was the "World News Tonight" anchor and now he is a journalist.) I'm sure that being employed as a journalist with ABC is aiding in his recovery.

At some point, you were asked to do a presentation in front of noninvestment bankers at work and that helped to boost your confidence. But then you also mentioned that certain aspects of your work brought up moments of self-doubt. What advice can you give to others with a brain injury that have re-entered the workforce and are facing emotions of self-doubt?

Before my injury, I had moments of self-doubt at work, too. After my injury, that old demon of self-doubt was multiplied about a thousand times.

At speaking engagements, I try to tell survivors to concentrate on what you can do post-injury. Not to say that individuals should ignore challenges, but first, take stock of where you are and how far you have come. Feel good about those gains and how they relate to the present moment.

By assessing what you can do right now, the challenges ahead are not so overwhelming. If I worry that, *"I'm not as good as I used to be"* then I'm not going to be any good. It's more important that I concentrate and focus on making my current situation better. It's tough because thoughts of self-doubt do come. When I have those frustrating moments, I take a deep breath and try to remove myself from the situation. If I get too caught up in self-doubt, it can become a downward spiral. If I get too down, nothing seems to help. It's better to take a step back and say, *"Hey, wait a minute. Look at what I have done and look at what I can do."* Feel proud of that; feel proud of how far you've come.

What are you doing today and what future plans do you have?

Currently, I speak around the country and work very closely with a number of nonprofit organizations. My message is of hope, possibility, resilience and overcoming adversity. I currently speak to all kinds of groups including businesses, universities, brain injury associations, sexual assault centers and hospitals. I use my personal experience to let people know that they can accomplish so much more than they ever thought possible – they can reclaim their lives.

I like to give the message: *"Yes, with brain injury, there are deficits, but instead of looking at the negative, look at what you can do."* Survivors can do so much more than most people think is possible. I try to

Pictured below: *Trisha, in sunglasses, running across the finish line of the 1995 NYC Marathon.*



spread the word that there is hope.

In addition to my speaking engagements, I am the chairman of the Achilles Track Club, an organization that encourages individuals with disabilities to participate in running. At Achilles, I founded the annual Hope and Possibility 5 Mile Race in Central Park. It is a wonderful event bringing the able bodied and those with disabilities together to set goals and compete. The best news is that we are expanding this race to other cities! I am on the board of directors of Gaylord Hospital (the rehabilitation hospital where I recovered), and I am also getting more involved in speaking to VA hospital brain injury programs.

What responsibility do you think brain injury survivors have in order to meet their rehabilitation goals?

I believe survivors need to take responsibility for their recovery. Other people are not going to make it happen for them. At the same time, I think it is important that survivors realize they are not alone. It was important for me to feel like my rehabilitation team was working with me – that we were in this together.

Also, I saw myself as a survivor rather than a victim, and that was very important. In part, that view came because of the support I received. The message was loud and clear: I had done nothing wrong and I wasn't to blame. Seeing myself as a survivor was a mindset, and it helped me heal. It also helped me take responsibility for my recovery and helped me muster the energy needed to move forward. Taking back control of a situation where I was completely out of control was an integral part of the recovery. ♦