

# Shepherd

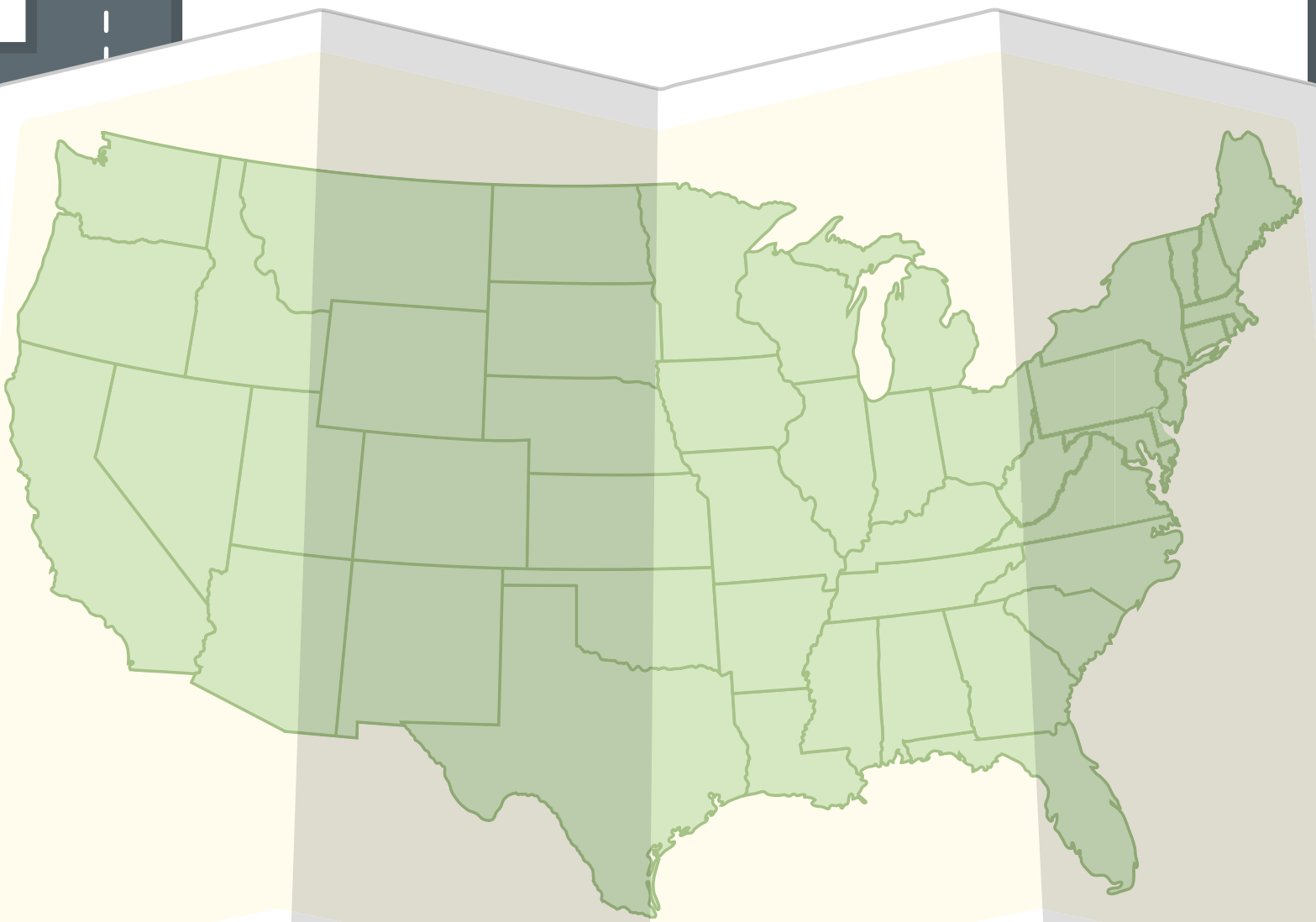
MEDICAL TREATMENT • RESEARCH • REHABILITATION

## Center Spinal Column®

Worth  
THE  
Trip

Families Travel  
to *Shepherd*  
*Center* for  
Specialized  
Care

Patients at Shepherd Center  
come from across the country  
and around the globe.



Shepherd Center receives referrals from  
**all 50 states and multiple countries.**

# Worth the Trip:

## Families Travel to Shepherd Center for Specialized Care

In a time of crisis, it may be reassuring to know that there is another family that's been in your shoes - the Shepherd family, who co-founded Shepherd Center in 1975.

While body surfing off a beach in Rio de Janeiro, James Shepherd, then 22, sustained a spinal cord injury and became paralyzed from the neck down. While James received acute care, his parents searched for rehabilitation options to give James the best chance at recovery. At the time, options were limited, so James traveled from his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, to receive care at a rehabilitation hospital across the country. James returned home with regained movement and restored hope.

Shortly after his return home, James and his parents, Alana and Harold, began plans to open Shepherd Center to provide world-class rehabilitative care that would be worth traveling for. Now, more than 45 years later, Shepherd Center treats approximately 850 inpatients, 450 day program patients, and 7,500 outpatients each year, all of whom have faced a life-changing injury or illness.

After a spinal cord injury, brain injury, or stroke, one of the most important decisions one can make is where to seek rehabilitation. While Shepherd Center can boast about industry-leading outcomes, on-site housing, community re-integration outings, research, and much more, it is patients who tell the story best. Read on to learn from Shepherd Center alumni Alexander, Reagan, and Hannibal about why they chose Shepherd Center and what, to them, made Shepherd Center **worth the trip**.



## Meet Alexander Florida

For 15 years, Alexander Borges, 50, applied his doctorate in structural engineering to various projects in Puerto Rico. But when a job opened in Orlando, Florida, that focused on his passion for designing structures, he and his family moved to advance Alexander's career. He has worked at the company ever since.

On October 26, 2020, Alexander visited Miami to inspect the roof of a client's building. "I don't remember exactly how it happened, but at some point, a portion of the roof collapsed, and I fell about 35 to 40 feet," Alexander says.

He was rushed to Ryder Trauma Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami. For one month, he was in the ICU in an induced coma. He did not emerge to a conscious state until three weeks after the fall.

After extensive research, his wife, Licia decided Shepherd Center was the best option for Alexander's rehabilitation.

### Choosing Shepherd Center

"I read about Shepherd's quality of service and decided to contact the hospital," Licia says.

"I'm very happy I made that decision." Alexander transferred to Shepherd Center's Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program. Licia recalls how pleasantly surprised they were with the therapy team's efficiency.

Research consistently shows the earlier someone can start rehabilitation, the better the outcomes, including being able to do activities of daily living, maintain hobbies, and even return to work or school. Because Shepherd Center, ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* among the top 10 rehabilitation hospitals in the nation, is equipped to handle all levels of care – even patients who are still acutely ill often start intensive rehabilitation sooner.

"We arrived at 1 p.m. that day, and by 6 p.m., we were settled in our room, and he



was already seen by the entire team," Licia says.

***"We were impressed with how organized and prepared they were to start treatment immediately."***

Alexander received intensive physical, occupational, and speech therapy for several hours a day. He also had access to Shepherd Center's recreation therapy program, which, thanks to philanthropic support, is one of the largest programs of its type in the country. Recreation therapy helps patients lead healthy and active lives as independently as possible through recreation activities. It can look like learning to garden with adaptive tools, taking an outing to the airport to learn how to fly again after injury or illness, or even playing on one of Shepherd Center's 11 sports teams.

"We understand that patients are going through more than just recovery from an injury; they are learning a new way of life and establishing a new 'normal,'" says Michael Yochelson, M.D., MBA, Shepherd Center's chief medical officer.

### Getting Back to Himself

As part of the rehabilitation program, patients may take advantage of other integrated programs, including family and psychosocial counseling and support, transition support, community outings, and vocational counseling to help patients return to work or school, among others.

One of Alexander's hobbies is weightlifting, so he was thrilled when his physical therapist gave him some familiar lifting exercises to perform. He also enjoyed speech therapy because he worked on challenging puzzles to solve each day. With more than 46 years of experience caring for patients with the most complex conditions, the Shepherd Center team was uniquely suited – more than a traditional rehabilitation hospital – to help Alexander recover and meet goals specific to him.

"Every day, the team would push me the right way to feel motivated," Alexander says.





“Staying so active helped me a lot physically and also emotionally.” Alexander was most concerned about his cognitive reasoning, and the specialized care at Shepherd Center helped him meet one of his personal goals – helping his daughter with her homework.

“My daughter called me one day because she was having trouble solving five problems on her physics homework,” Alexander says. “Normally, this would be pretty easy for me, but I was concerned I wouldn’t be able to do it because of my brain injury. You can imagine how excited I was when I was able to work on the problems and find out my answers were right!” A month after arriving at Shepherd Center, he was able to return home on December 24.

“At the end of the process at Shepherd, I felt like I had come back to myself and very close to the brain function

before my accident,” Alexander says.

After receiving positive results from a cognitive test with his local doctor, he started work again at his engineering firm.

**“We would like to let other patients and families know that there is always hope,” Licia says.**

“The science helps you figure out what is going on with your loved one, but then having the strength inside you to keep the faith will help you accomplish what you need.”



## Meet Reagan North Carolina

As Reagan Martin tells it, she and her two sisters are as close to amphibious as two-legged creatures can get.

“We grew up in two places — the pool and the lake,” she says. As the sisters grew up in Clayton, North Carolina, their love of the water evolved into aquatic competition. All three earned scholarships to swim competitively in college; Reagan, 20, went to Towson University.

So, when Reagan went on a weekend trip last summer to a friend’s family home on North Carolina’s Neuse River, it’s no surprise the first thing she noticed was their dock.

“I said, ‘I’m going to jump off that before I leave here,’” she recalls. When she did, Reagan took a running start and, at the last second, decided to dive headfirst rather than jump feet first. Even underwater, she heard the crack when her head hit the river bottom.

Reagan sustained a C-4 spinal cord injury that paralyzed her from the shoulders down and led to severe respiratory problems. At Vidant Medical Center in Greenville, North Carolina, the medical team placed her on a ventilator. She also endured five surgeries, countless blood transfusions, adverse reactions to several treatments, and a partially collapsed lung.

In late August of 2020, six weeks after her injury, Reagan was flown by air ambulance to Atlanta and admitted to Shepherd Center’s ICU. She was still completely dependent on a ventilator.

## Breathing on Her Own

Fortunately, Shepherd Center’s ventilator services team, led by an experienced and aggressive group of respiratory therapists, pulmonologists, and an intensivist, was prepared to work on weaning Reagan off the ventilator, just as they try to do with patients whenever possible.

Weaning would prove challenging for Reagan. When her Shepherd care team immediately checked her lung capacity, it registered at zero.

Without any function of her diaphragm — the muscle that aids breathing — Reagan’s body couldn’t use a Diaphragm Pacing System (DPS), which can help transition patients from a ventilator and trigger their diaphragm to move on its own.

“That was a real low point,” Reagan says. “Among everything else, I knew if I was on a ventilator forever, I’d never get back in the water. I couldn’t fathom that, so I never accepted that would be the end of my story.”





Neither did her Shepherd Center care team. As Reagan's treatments continued, she noticed she could take shallow breaths on her own while being transferred to a portable ventilator. In November, a test showed a slight uptick in vital lung capacity. As she continued making incremental progress, the Shepherd care team slowly weaned her from the ventilator.

On December 9, she had a DPS implanted. To everyone's surprise, improvements came rapidly. Just 10 days later, after nearly five months on a ventilator, she came off it completely. A month after that, the DPS was removed, and her tracheostomy tube came out.

***"I'm so incredibly thankful for Shepherd Center," Reagan says. "This place has changed my life in so many positive ways."***

"I know for a fact that if I hadn't come here, I wouldn't be off a ventilator. And I wouldn't be pushing myself so far physically. They do everything they can to make you as independent as possible."

## Working Toward Independence

Case in point: The entire time Reagan remained on a ventilator, she also engaged in speech, recreation, physical, and occupational therapy as part of Shepherd Center's Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program.

"It was hard, but it made such a difference," she says. "As soon as I got off the vent and the trach, I could ramp up to doing more so much quicker. Doing rehab the entire time really made me feel like I was working toward something, that I had a role to play in getting better."

And that's by design. A specialized center like Shepherd Center has a broader continuum of care to maximize outcomes and teach patients how to manage the injury once home. By March of 2021, Reagan was learning how to pick up objects, practicing slide board transfers to get in and out of bed, and pushing longer distances in a manual wheelchair.

Best of all: Reagan has returned to the water. On March 11, 2021, a week before leaving for home, her therapists helped her swim in Shepherd Center's pool.

"It was incredible to get back in," Reagan says. "It reminded me of how far I've come, but it also gave me a new set of goals. I've now got a list of things to work on to get better — in and out of the pool."



## Meet Hannibal New York

In July 2016, Hannibal Black, 27, of Mahopac, New York, lived in Alabama after graduating from Alabama A&M

University with a Master of Engineering (M.Eng.) in Systems and Materiel Engineering. While focusing on his education and career were top priorities, Hannibal also enjoyed riding his motorcycle to relax.

After leaving work one day in July of 2016, he decided to ride his motorcycle with a group of friends. "We were riding on the back roads and approaching a turn," Hannibal recalls.

"I must have been going at a high rate of speed when my motorcycle slipped on some sand. I slammed into a tree and boulders on the side of the road."

Hannibal instantly lost consciousness. He sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and was minimally conscious for 23 days. Later that same month, he transferred to Shepherd Center's Disorders of Consciousness (DoC) Brain Injury gram in Atlanta.

"I'm still blown away when I think about being 'out' for 23 days," Hannibal says.



## ***"I am absolutely blessed that I woke up at Shepherd Center."***

When Hannibal emerged from his minimally conscious state, he began rehabilitation in Shepherd Center's Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program. He had to relearn how to walk, eat, use the restroom, and perform his personal care, among other things.

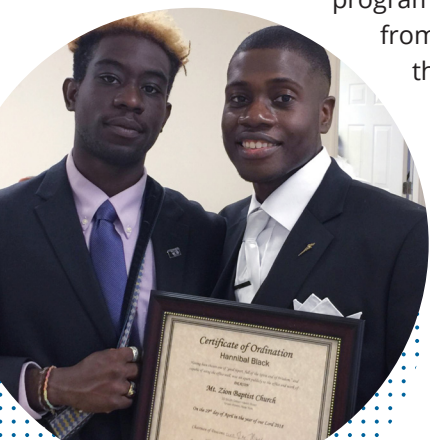
## **Going the Distance**

Like Hannibal, nearly half of Shepherd Center's patients come from outside Georgia. One of the biggest concerns families have when choosing a rehabilitation hospital for their loved one is distance – and where they will stay during their loved one's rehabilitation if they choose a hospital outside their hometown. Hannibal's family traveled from New York to stay with him during his rehabilitation and lived in the Irene and George Woodruff Family Residence Center, which is donor-funded and available to patients and families who live more than 60 miles from the hospital. The apartment-style suites allow families to be close by and participate in family training as their loved one undergoes rehabilitation.

For Hannibal, his physical therapy sessions have a special place in his heart.

"They kicked my butt!" Hannibal jokes. "Even though they can be tough, the therapists approach your rehab out of kindness and love. It was a huge part of my healing process."

After completing inpatient rehabilitation, Hannibal transitioned to Shepherd Pathways, a comprehensive outpatient rehabilitation program for people recovering from brain injury. After three months of hard work, Hannibal graduated from Shepherd Center's rehabilitation program. He was able to return home on Thanksgiving week.



## **Finding His Calling**

Since graduating from Shepherd Center, Hannibal has made many positive changes in his life. He lost a remarkable 100 pounds and continues to work on all aspects of his health. Hannibal challenges his mind by teaching himself SQL, and he started his own video editing company, Big Han Edits.

Ultimately, he has the long-term goal to return to a career in systems engineering.

While Hannibal keeps himself busy with these worthy pursuits, his true calling and passion is his faith. Since returning home to New York, he was ordained as a deacon at his church. He applies his skills as a deacon to donating his time as a spiritual care volunteer at a local hospice working with end-of-life patients. His mission is to make others happy.

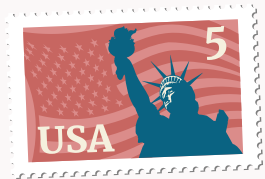
"I don't believe I would have found my calling without the motorcycle crash," Hannibal says.

***"Even though it seems awful, it was a blessing in disguise. Tough things may happen to you, and tough things may happen around you. But the only thing that matters is what happens in you!"***



## Better Outcomes from Specialized Rehabilitation

When choosing a rehabilitation program, you should feel confident about the quality of care you or your loved one will receive. We recommend that you compare options based on key criteria so that you can make an informed decision. Admissions staff can help answer these questions.

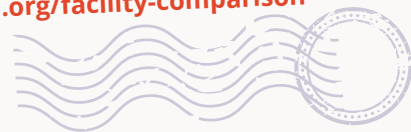


### Things to consider when selecting a rehabilitation facility:

- What is the average age of patients in your programs?
- Does the hospital specialize in spinal cord/brain injury/stroke, or is it one of many services they provide?
- What percentage of patients return home or to the community rather than to a long-term care facility?
- What housing is available for family members?
- Is there family training?

Shepherd Center has materials and online programs to help individuals and families learn about spinal cord injury, brain injury, and stroke and where to go for help. For more information, check out:

- Understanding Spinal Cord Injury – [spinalinjury101.org](http://spinalinjury101.org)
- Understanding Brain Injury – [braininjury101.org](http://braininjury101.org)
- How to Choose a Rehabilitation Facility PDFs - [shepherd.org/facility-comparison](http://shepherd.org/facility-comparison)



## Research Provides Hope for Now and the Future

In addition to providing world-class care, Shepherd Center is a world-renowned center for neurological and neuromuscular research. We collaborate with leading experts at other hospitals, research centers, medical schools, universities, and industry around the world and have more than 75 research projects in progress.



Our goal is to develop, refine, and evaluate new treatments, drugs, surgical techniques, diagnostic tools, and therapeutic interventions. We also work to improve the effectiveness – related to both cost and delivery – of clinical services and document the long-term results and benefits of rehabilitation to improve patient outcomes.



One of the many things that makes Shepherd Center worth the trip is the access to research and the possibility of participating in clinical trials. For more information, visit [shepherd.org/research](http://shepherd.org/research).



Shepherd  
Center

Shepherd Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia, is a private, not-for-profit hospital specializing in medical treatment, research and rehabilitation for people with spinal cord injury, brain injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, spine and chronic pain, and other neuromuscular conditions. Founded in 1975, Shepherd Center is ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* among the top 10 rehabilitation hospitals in the nation. In its more than four decades, Shepherd Center has grown from a six-bed rehabilitation unit to a world-renowned, 152-bed hospital that treats more than 740 inpatients, 280 day program patients and more than 7,000 outpatients each year in more than 46,000 visits.