



Photo by Leita Cowart

I Think “I CAN”

“I Can” Program helps brain-injured students succeed in school. **BY DAN SADOWSKY**

Left: Kayla Caldwell Countryman, who sustained a traumatic brain injury in a car wreck in the summer of 2006, credits Shepherd Center’s “I Can” Program with boosting her confidence in her ability to go to college this fall. She also works part time as a waitress at Johnny’s Pizza in Villa Rica, Ga.

Less than two months after graduating high school — and just months before her first class at West Georgia Technical College — Kayla Caldwell Countryman sustained an injury that made her believe she’d never step foot in a classroom again.

One afternoon in July 2006, as she drove to meet a friend near her home west of Atlanta, Kayla was hit in a T-bone collision with a dump truck. She broke bones in her elbow, neck, pelvis and tailbone, sustained a serious brain injury and lapsed into a two-week coma.

Moreover, the wreck took away her confidence.

Kayla had battled dyslexia growing up, relying on memory skills to overcome her learning disability. Even after a faster-than-normal recovery at Shepherd Center, she feared being helpless in the classroom.

“After my wreck, I had no confidence in myself to go to school,” says Kayla, who lives in Villa Rica, Ga. “I really thought I was going to be a waitress forever.”

Then Kayla heard about “I Can,” a new summer academic program at Shepherd Center. It was conceived with people like Kayla in mind, says program coordinator Bonnie Schaudé: 15-to-23-year-olds with brain injuries who need to regain the social and academic skills required to succeed in a classroom.

“The ‘I Can’ Program just taught me that if I use the right strategies, I can do this, even with a brain injury.” — Kayla Caldwell Countryman

“These are young people who’ve maybe been back for a semester at school, or they’re trying to get into college and maybe they’ve audited a class,” explains Bonnie, a speech language pathologist at Shepherd Center. “This program is designed to give them additional academic and social skills that will increase their success in returning to school.”

During the summer, certain students with brain injuries may be at risk of losing some of the cognitive gains they made as a result of the structure and stimulation of academic work, she adds. “Our program was developed to support these gains while providing additional strategies and social skills development to enhance their continued progress.”

In 2006, Shepherd hired a special-education teacher to design a unique curriculum based on the Self-Determination Model, a popular instruction method for students with cognitive deficits. It’s based on evidence that students perform better when they’re involved in the planning, decision-making and implementation of their education programs. The resulting three-week course of study includes lessons on social skills, such as goal-setting, assertive communication and conflict resolution; study skills, such as taking notes, doing research and writing a paper; and individual instruction in reading, math and writing.

Kayla spent most mornings in July 2007 in three hours of “I Can” classes. In that time, she acquired new memory strategies, honed her essay-writing skills and learned the steps to apply to college. Plus, she got a confidence boost from sitting beside peers who’d already gone back to school, she notes.

“I thought, ‘Wow, they could do this.’ And some of them had worse brain injuries than I did,” Kayla recalls.

This summer, Laura Vazquez from the Marcus Community Bridge Program at Shepherd and Terry Bolinger, the academic instructor, are developing additional data-collection tools to evaluate the “I Can” program’s success. But Kayla, who turned 20 in April, doesn’t need convincing. She got married in March, and this fall will enroll in West Central Technical College in Douglasville, Ga. — the first step along a path she hopes will lead to becoming an occupational therapist. She is admittedly nervous, but confident.

“If I wouldn’t have taken that class, I wouldn’t be going to school right now,” she says, hastening to also credit her mom’s encouragement and her newfound faith in Jesus. “The ‘I Can’ program just taught me that if I use the right strategies, I can do this, even with a brain injury.”