



Austin Vestal

Jacksonville, Fla.

W

hen **Austin Vestal** ran across the finish line at the Gate River Run 15K in Jacksonville, Fla., in March 2013, it was nothing short of a miracle.

Just nine months earlier, on June 2, 2012, Austin was in a horrific car accident that almost killed him. He'd hit a telephone pole with his car, and the force ejected him through the rear window. He sustained a traumatic brain injury, ruptured his spleen and nearly severed his leg.

When he arrived at Jacksonville's Shands Medical Center, he was declared dead on arrival. The doctors were able to revive him, but warned his mother, Sandy Vestal, that if he did survive, he would be in a coma for months, and if he did wake up, his prognosis could be poor.

"It was grim," Sandy recalls. "They prepared me for the absolute worst."

"They were absolutely the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. My son would not be where he is today without Shepherd."

Sandy Vestal

For the next two weeks, Sandy and her daughter Allie sat vigil in the intensive care unit, willing Austin to wake up. "Those days were pure torture," she recalls. "I felt so helpless."

On day 15 Austin opened his eyes. He began making slow progress after that. Sandy became "cautiously optimistic" about Austin's outcome.

Two months after his accident, Austin arrived via ambulance from Jacksonville to Atlanta. Sandy says the minute they walked through Shepherd Center's doors, she was immediately hit with a sense of assurance and hope. "It was as if God had laid out the red carpet for us and said, 'It's all going to be OK.' They were absolutely the most amazing

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Austin, now 26, spent two months in Shepherd Center's Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program as an inpatient and another month at Shepherd Pathways,

Shepherd's post-acute rehabilitation program for people recovering from brain injury.

His goal from day one was to return to his passion of running, he says. He had run the Gate River Run the previous year and was determined to do it again.

But first he needed to learn how to walk.

And talk, eat, tie his shoes, get dressed and basically every other activity of daily living. He also had to regain the 55 pounds he lost while recovering – dropping from 210 to 145 pounds in his 6-foot, 1-inch frame. The Shepherd staff was so determined to help Austin regain the weight,

the chef personally came to his room to find out what he liked to eat. His favorites at Shepherd were pancakes and sloppy Joes.

While they were taking care of Austin, staff at Shepherd Center also took care of Sandy and Allie. "They gave us a place to live. They gave us all our essentials, internet access, cable and laundry," she says. "They even gave us laundry detergent. The Shepherd staff said: 'You have enough to worry about. We don't want you to worry about the small things.' It was so wonderful."

Austin, who credits his "stubborn personality" for his drive and determination to improve, is also grateful for his team at Shepherd. "The people there care about their patients and want to do a good job for them," he says. "The word I would use to describe them is 'Awesome.'"

He ran the 2013 Gate River Run in two hours, 21 minutes, nine minutes faster than he'd planned. In 2014, he returned to the run with a goal of two hours. Again he blasted through that goal, finishing in one hour, 46 minutes.

Austin, who is now back at work in the delivery department of Champion Brands and living on his own in an apartment, takes it all in stride.

"It's kind of weird to be a miracle," Austin says, "but if I'm here to inspire other people, then that's fine."

Read more about **Austin Vestal** and watch a video interview with him and his mother at: news.shepherd.org/fit-for-life

