

# VOLUNTEER news

A newsletter for Shepherd Center Auxiliary & Volunteers



## The Patient Who Changed Me

People who work at Shepherd Center say it again and again. Every patient has a story – a traumatic story, a survival story, a redemption story. Yet while Shepherd Center has a national reputation for the profound effect it has on the people who come through its doors, those same patients and clients often have a lasting, even life-changing impact on the doctors, nurses, therapists, case managers and others who work with them.

Recreational therapist Shannon Ali, CTRS, had worked at Shepherd Center for about a year when an 18-year-old college freshman from Tennessee transferred from the inpatient Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program to the SCI Day Program team designated for adolescents. Ten years later, that patient still influences Ali's work. "Those times when I think to myself, 'Am I even making a difference? Is this really benefiting them?' I think of those stories with Fletcher," Ali says.

Fletcher Cleaves was a scholarship football player when he was paralyzed from the chest down after a car crash caused by a distracted driver. Believing the injury and subsequent disability would forever diminish his life, Fletcher resisted recreational therapy because he thought it was useless.

When Ali escorted him to a restaurant, he paused in his wheelchair for someone to open the door – until Ali insisted he do it himself. When she coaxed him into a store, he said someone else would always have to shop for him – until Ali convinced him otherwise. He reluctantly went to Atlanta's airport to learn to navigate security and boarding, through a Shepherd Center program sponsored by Delta Air Lines, saying he'd never travel by plane.



Now 28 and a college graduate, Fletcher lives in Memphis, Tennessee, on his own, where he drives, works in IT and is a motivational speaker. He has also traveled to five continents, trekking up the Eiffel Tower and riding a personal watercraft in Barbados.

“A therapist can make or break a patient at a critical time,” Fletcher says. “They’re going to get you to live your life. That’s the mentality Ali had. Who knows where I’d be if she didn’t?”

Ali, mother of a 12-year-old daughter, still talks regularly with Fletcher and says Fletcher’s influenced Ali as a therapist. Things he’s learned, he passes on to Ali. She incorporates what he tells her about his post-crash life into sessions with current patients. He is also someone her daughter admires.

Fletcher and other former patients send Ali photos or videos of themselves back at home opening doors, skirting sidewalk obstacles, shopping. It’s their way of saying thanks. Those melt my heart,” Ali says. “They’re real life.” And to Ali, they are also reminder to keep pushing. “I’m part of making a difference.”

---

## Shepherd Center Provides Plans for Expansion



Feeling a little discouraged and needing some positive news for the future? We are delighted to share some!

Shepherd Center has filed plans for expansion that will provide additional and longer-term housing for patients and families receiving care at the nationally-ranked neurorehabilitation hospital.

The new construction will add approximately 160 housing units for patients and their loved ones, more than doubling the amount of current housing available and allowing all patient families traveling to Shepherd Center to stay in donor-funded housing the entire length of their loved one’s stay.

“The kinds of injuries and illnesses that bring patients to Shepherd Center are challenging not just for patients, but for entire families – physically, emotionally and financially,” said Sarah Morrison, PT, MBA, MHA, president and CEO of Shepherd Center. “Family members become crucial parts of the care team at Shepherd, participating in a wide variety of training and education before they often become primary caregivers when their loved ones return home. Expanded housing will ensure that our patients are surrounded by the love and support they need and that families – no matter where they call home – can be a part of the rehabilitative journey.”

The expansion will take place at the 1860 Peachtree Road site, which Shepherd Center acquired in late 2018. The land acquisition and subsequent expansion was championed by late Shepherd Center co-founder James Shepherd, Jr., who passed away in December 2019. Shepherd Center was founded in 1975 after James sustained a spinal cord injury in 1973.

“From my experience as a case manager for patients and their families at Shepherd Center, housing is one of their main concerns,” said Julie Shepherd, CCM, LMSW, CLCP. “Being able to take this worry off their hearts so that they can focus on the healing path ahead and the return to their communities is a game-changer.”

From April 2020 to March 2021, Shepherd Center served more than 740 inpatients and an additional 250-plus Day Program patients. Underscoring the need for family housing near Shepherd Center, more than half of Shepherd Center’s inpatients during the same time period came from outside of Georgia, and 72% came from outside the metro Atlanta area.

“To this point, we have not been able to grow our family housing at the same pace that our patients and families have needed it,” said Jamie Shepherd, MBA, MHA, chief operating officer of Shepherd Center. “My father often talked about how having his family close by during his rehabilitation made all the difference in his recovery. We are proud to provide a home away from home for our patients and their families and to be able to continue my father’s legacy of caring for both the patient and the family.”

Expanded housing also has implications for patient outcomes due to both the support and encouragement loved ones provide and the family’s ability to easily participate in family training that helps ease the patient’s transition home.

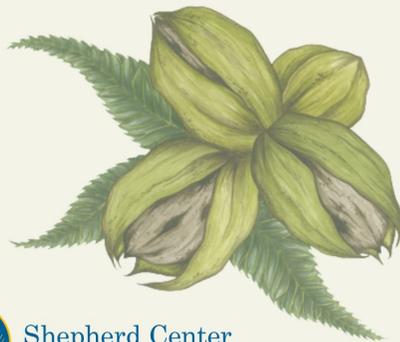
“Throughout Shepherd’s more than 45 years of experience, we’ve consistently witnessed how integral families are in the rehabilitation process – and our outcomes reflect that,” Morrison said. “With well-prepared and supported family members by their side, Shepherd Center patients return home at a higher rate than the national average and have fewer rehospitalizations.”

The expansion offers Shepherd Center room to grow further by including significant green space with the flexibility to eventually build a second tower to provide more patient or family housing, clinical areas and office space.

Shepherd Center is working with architecture firm Rule Joy Trammell + Rubio, development partner Wood Partners and contractor Brasfield & Gorrie on this transformational initiative.



**Shepherd Center**  
**PECANS ON PEACHTREE** 



**Shepherd Center**  
**PECANS ON PEACHTREE** 

### **Pecans Are Still For Sale**

Just a reminder that our pecans and pecan treats are still available the month of January! They are top quality and make delicious gifts for birthdays, anniversaries or any other occasion. 100% of the net proceeds of all Pecans on Peachtree sales directly benefit the patients and families.

The website is [pecansonpeachtree.org](http://pecansonpeachtree.org)

## ABOUT 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. Patients at Shepherd Center get more than just medical care: They get an experience that brings healing and hope. Shepherd's team of high specialized, experienced clinicians are dedicated to helping their patients rebuild their lives with hope, independence, and dignity, advocating for their full inclusion in all aspects of the community while promoting safety and injury prevention. When you purchase from Pecans on Peachtree®, sales directly benefit the patients and families at Shepherd Center.

**2020 Peachtree Road NW  
Atlanta, GA 30309**

[Visit our Website](#)

