Shepherd Center's Recreation Therapy Program helps patients lead healthy and active lives, all with its trademark dose of hope and fun.

Ready for Adventure

Adaptive Sports Build Community | Health and Wellness Clinics Support an Active Lifestyle | Shepherd Celebrates Adolescent Patients and Alums
Dear Readers,

At Shepherd, our staff comes to work every day on a mission to help patients rebuild their lives and begin again after injury or illness. Sometimes that means patients are re-learning activities of daily living like dressing or grooming, and sometimes it’s how to use a wheelchair or adaptive technology to prepare for a return to work. These all-important skills help patients start a new chapter in life. Our recreation therapists build on that foundation when they ask patients what they love to do, what puts smiles on their faces, and what makes them feel alive – and then help them prepare for those adventures.

In this issue of Spinal Column, we take a closer look at recreation therapy, an essential part of rehabilitation at Shepherd. Just like it sounds, recreation therapy uses recreational activities and tools — like an outing to an event or venue, an adaptive tennis lesson, or an art class — to restore and rehabilitate our patients’ levels of function, independence, and involvement in life activities. Whether it’s learning how to do a long-enjoyed activity in a different way or finding a new interest entirely, recreation therapy promotes health – both physical and mental – improves quality of life, and removes barriers to participating in their communities.

Beginning on page 5, we feature three patients who rediscovered a sense of joy through recreation therapy, including Kendall Ball. While she was inpatient following a stroke, Kendall, who has always been a crafter, was thrilled to find that arts and crafts could be an essential element of her therapy.

And you will meet Shepherd recreation therapist Detrick Gates, who strives to help patients find activities to improve their quality of life. Read more about Detrick’s perspective on page 4.

Then, reflect on the healing power of adaptive sports on page 13 when you read about wheelchair fencing medalist Ellen Geddes and her quest to qualify for the 2024 Paralympics.

Whatever adventure means to you, best wishes on your next one.

Enjoy,

Sarah Morrison

Sarah Morrison, PT, MBA, MHA
Chief Executive Officer of Shepherd Center
Gifts of Generosity

If you would like to make a gift to support the work you have read about, please contact Sarah L. Batts at the Shepherd Center Foundation at 404-350-7305 or visit shepherd.org.

Makeup artist Sam Henry put the finishing touches on Shepherd alum Layla Rogan’s makeup at Shepherd Center’s Project Rollway event.

See news.shepherd.org for additional online content.
Shepherd Center has once again been recognized as a top hospital for rehabilitation in U.S. News’ Best Hospitals rankings. Shepherd Center has been ranked among the top rehabilitation hospitals since 2008, demonstrating its commitment to consistent, high-quality care delivered with hope, humor, and hard work. The hospital serves as a national destination for providing world-class clinical care, research, and family support for people experiencing the most complex conditions, including spinal cord and brain injuries, multi-trauma, traumatic amputations, stroke, multiple sclerosis, and pain.

The annual Best Hospitals rankings and ratings are designed to assist patients and their doctors in making informed decisions about where to receive quality care for challenging health conditions or elective procedures. “Choosing a hospital for rehabilitation is one of the most important decisions a family can make, especially for the most complex conditions, and we’re grateful to U.S. News for empowering families to make that choice,” says Sarah Morrison, PT, MBA, MHA, CEO of Shepherd Center. “Being part of our patients’ stories as they begin again after injury or illness is incredibly humbling, as is this recognition as a top rehabilitation hospital.”

The committee currently includes members from Shepherd Center, Grady Health, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, and Wellstar Kennestone. Sub-committees will include groups focused on rehabilitation data analysis, improving the transition to rehabilitation, incorporating rehabilitation quality standards, and developing trauma/rehabilitation quality indicators.

Ford Vox, M.D., Named Chair of Georgia Trauma Commission’s Rehabilitation Committee

Tens of thousands of Georgians experience trauma each year. Of those, many will next need rehabilitation for their injuries.

With that in mind, the Georgia Trauma Commission recently formed the Rehabilitation Committee and named Ford Vox, M.D., (pictured, right) medical director of the Disorders of Consciousness Program at Shepherd Center, as chair. The committee includes leaders from rehabilitation providers throughout the state.

“I am pleased to represent Shepherd Center and take a leadership role in organizing Georgia’s trauma system’s rehab integration efforts,” Dr. Vox says. “As the inaugural chairperson of the Georgia Trauma Commission Rehabilitation Committee, I see tremendous value in convening this highly specialized group of stakeholders tasked with optimizing the delivery of care and recovery outcomes for trauma patients.”

The goal of the Rehabilitation Committee is to foster collaboration among the Georgia Trauma Commission and Georgia’s trauma and rehabilitation centers so that Georgia’s citizens get the care they deserve as they heal from trauma and seek rehabilitative care. The Rehabilitation Committee will assess the needs for rehabilitation for patients who sustain traumatic injuries, focusing on pediatric patients and patients with traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries. The Rehabilitation Committee will also help guide the Georgia Trauma Commission and state policymakers regarding the rehabilitative needs of Georgia’s trauma population as they work toward establishing specific standards, guidelines, minimum qualifications, and transfer agreements for rehabilitative care.
Shepherd Center Names New Chief Nursing Officer

Shepherd Center has a new top nurse. Tiffany LeCroy, MSN, RN, CRNN, FNP-C, ACNS-BC, FARN, (pictured, right) has been named chief nursing officer.

LeCroy’s tenure at Shepherd Center, which began in 1995, includes several key roles within the organization, including staff nurse, charge nurse, clinical research coordinator, clinical nurse expert, nurse manager, and most recently, unit nurse manager in the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program. LeCroy has successfully developed and implemented numerous programs at Shepherd Center, demonstrating her ability to drive transformative care. Additionally, she is widely recognized as an authority in brain injury care and rehabilitation.

“Tiffany embodies Shepherd Center’s culture of hope, humor, and hard work,” says Jamie Shepherd, MBA, MHA, president and chief operating officer of Shepherd Center. “Her vast expertise in nursing and her experience with the patient population we serve, along with her willingness to learn and serve as a trailblazer in providing care, will benefit Shepherd Center patients, families, and our high standard of care for generations to come.”

LeCroy earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in nursing from North Georgia College and State University and completed a post-master’s clinical nurse specialist program at Georgia State University. She is also board-certified as a family nurse practitioner, adult clinical nurse specialist, and a certified rehabilitation registered nurse.

“Working at Shepherd has always been a rich and rewarding experience, and I am incredibly grateful to have been chosen to serve as chief nursing officer,” says LeCroy. “Our nursing staff provides high-quality care with industry-leading outcomes for patients who are working to begin again after a complex injury or illness. And they do it with heart, encouragement, and the willingness to be innovative. I look forward to helping lead this team as Shepherd Center expands to serve even more patients and families.”

LeCroy assumed the role when Tammy King, MSN, ET, CRNN, CCM, retired after a 47-year career at Shepherd Center.

Building the Bridge from “I Can’t” to “I Can”

The construction of Shepherd Center’s two new buildings is progressing at a noteworthy pace. Both towers are significant pillars of Shepherd’s Vision 2025 and Pursuing Possible: The Campaign for Shepherd Center.

With construction led by Brasfield & Gorrie, the Arthur M. Blank Family Residences will house 160 fully furnished, accessible apartments for patients and their families. All levels of the parking deck and 14 of the building’s 16 floors have been poured, and Brasfield & Gorrie expects to top off the tower in the fall.

The Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation (MCAR), being built by Choate Construction, is the future home of the Dean Stroud Spine and Pain Institute and Shepherd’s new Innovation Institute. A large retaining wall was built to level off the site and ultimately provide access from the MCAR’s parking deck to the traffic signal. The first two of the tower’s parking floors were recently poured, and work has begun on the bridge connecting the Marcus-Woodruff Building and the MCAR Building.

Both projects and other improvements and expansion efforts are being funded by generous gifts to Shepherd Center’s Pursuing Possible Campaign. For information about the campaign and contributing, please contact Sarah Batts, senior vice president of advancement, at Sarah.Batts@Shepherd.org or 404-350-1705.
Putting Relationships First

Detrick Gates, CTRS, finds the relationships he forms as a recreation therapist at Shepherd Pathways fulfilling.

How long have you worked at Shepherd Center, and what is your role?
I’ve worked at Shepherd for almost four years. As a recreation therapist at Shepherd Pathways, I work with patients with brain injuries. I assess the level of assistance each person will need to be engaged in the community safely. So, if the person is ambulating, we walk to the park or the grocery store. Do they know to hit the button at the crosswalk? Do they know to look both ways? If we go somewhere that requires a van trip and I give them directions, can they get me back to our starting point? If they can, great; if they can’t, that’s okay too. That lets me know the level of assistance or supervision they need to be safe. I give them every opportunity to do as much as they can on their own. The goal is for that person to be as independent as possible.

My secondary role is supporting the other therapists in developing skills that the person needs to get back to their life. And then probably what I enjoy the most is the opportunities we have to get outside the walls and engage the larger community with events like Adventure Skills Workshop (ASW) and our health and wellness clinics.

What do you find most fulfilling about your job?
The relationships. It’s the best part that nobody teaches you in school. We learn all of the techniques, theories, and applied sciences, and we need them, but this person is not a theory. This is a person with needs and goals, and they’re dealing with really tough things. And I’ve realized that before I get to anything therapy-related, I need this person to trust me. So, I put a lot of my focus on building relationships. So that’s my favorite part — what I call forging my way into the family. I want them to see me as somebody who really cares about them first, and then I think the therapy part comes a lot easier.

The team dynamic is great. The other rec therapists, the other therapists that I’m on a treatment team with, are just phenomenal, and this job would be almost impossible without that group because so much of what I can incorporate into therapy is because I have three other experts in the room with me. I can talk things through with them, take new ideas back to the patient in the next session, and know that we will be doing something to help them succeed.

How does your role affect patients and their families?
I hope that they see the benefits of engaging in recreation therapy. We want to promote independence, but it can also be an opportunity to introduce people to something new.

And I hope those new activities add to their quality of life. I push our health and wellness initiatives because I think it’s beneficial and helps people engage. There are so many things you can do, and having an injury or disability is not a limiting factor. I try to communicate that and that yes, life will probably look a little different, but different doesn’t mean worse — different just means different — and we can do different better.

Education:
- Morris Brown College
- Bachelor’s degree in Recreation Therapy

Fun Facts:
- Detrick loves spending time with his daughters and attending all their sporting events.
- He loves sports and played baseball and football in college.
- Detrick also played violin and bass in high school.

Interview by Ruth Underwood

Detrick Gates plays cards and talks with Derrick Green, a Shepherd Pathways patient.

Photo by Joann Vitelli

news.shepherd.org
Whether it’s swimming with sharks, creating art, or picking up a new sport, Shepherd Center’s Recreation Therapy Program uses recreation activities to help patients lead healthy and active lifestyles, all with Shepherd Center’s trademark dose of hope and fun.

By Phillip Jordan
If Austin Yarbrough harbored any doubts about what he could do with a spinal cord injury, those initial doubts probably dissipated when the first whale shark swam by him, close enough to touch.

“Yeah, that was dope. It was the size of a bus,” Austin recalls about swimming in the Ocean Voyager exhibit at the Georgia Aquarium, one of his more memorable outings coordinated through Shepherd Center’s Recreation Therapy Program, the country’s largest program of its kind. Funded by generous donors, recreation therapy is incorporated into rehabilitation programs to improve self-esteem, relieve stress, and increase mobility.

“The rec therapists at Shepherd were awesome about showing me I could still do the things I’d done before my injury,” he says. “And the stuff I’d never done!”

Austin, now 26, came to Shepherd Center in 2021 with far more modest dreams than swimming with sharks and manta rays. In September of that year, he had sustained a T-10 incomplete spinal cord injury in a motorcycle accident. It happened when a car pulled out in front of him as Austin, a FedEx delivery driver, was going to cash his latest paycheck.

When Austin transferred to Shepherd a month later, he had yet to sit up on his own.
But he remembers the hope he felt as soon as he was wheeled through the doors.

“Everyone was all smiles and positive, helpful with anything,” Austin recalls. “I mean, the lady at the front desk was probably the nicest person I’d seen in a long, long time. It was really refreshing. I didn’t want for anything there.”

A few days in, he was sitting up with no assistance. By the end of that first week, he was pushing his wheelchair. Week two, he was putting on his clothes.

“It was crazy the progress, how quickly it happened,” Austin says. He credits much of his improvement and positive attitude to all the recreational therapy opportunities. Pre-injury, Austin was almost always spending time outside in his hometown of Lookout Valley, Tennessee. He played basketball, football, tennis, and ultimate frisbee. He fished. He worked on cars and motorcycles, too.

“Anything with a competitive, outdoor nature to it, I’m in,” Austin says.

He quickly tried several rec therapy options during his inpatient rehabilitation, including tennis, swimming, and basketball. It’s also no surprise that Austin was thrilled to meet Shepherd Center’s outdoor recreation specialist, Gavin McClintock, CTRS. McClintock introduced Austin to hiking in a three-wheeled all-terrain wheelchair. And as Austin has continued to improve his upper-body strength and mobility over the past two years, he’s done so with the help of Shepherd’s outdoor experiences.

Working with adaptive tools and Shepherd Center’s recreation therapists, Austin learned to water ski and tube during Shepherd’s hugely popular Adventure Skills Workshop, held annually at Camp ASCCA, an accessible facility on Lake Martin. He’s gone rock climbing. He’s even learned to hunt, one of the rare outdoor activities he hadn’t done pre-injury. He’s also fishing again, one of his longtime loves. Austin remembers his first fishing outing with McClintock and his Shepherd Center friends in creeks off the Soque River near Clarksville, Georgia. He caught several big rainbow trout during the outing, but they weren’t the only things in that stream getting hooked.

“I’m all about fly fishing now,” Austin says. “That was my first time, and, man, regular fishing feels boring now! With fly fishing, you’re always casting and reeling, so you’re constantly on task, always moving.”

Always in motion. That’s a pretty good description of Austin Yarbrough now, too. ✨
As summer wanes, Kendall Ball will do some harvesting in her garden in Buena Vista, Georgia. She will pick her beans, corn, and maybe the squash — if it didn’t get too much rain — with particular pride. Their journey began much as Kendall’s rebirth did this year, feeling warm sunlight coming in through a window at Shepherd Center.

“I started each of those as little seeds in cups on my windowsill there,” Kendall says. “It was through gardening as recreational therapy. When I came home, I brought those seeds in a planter with me and transferred them to my garden. Watching them grow throughout the season reminds me of how far I’ve come.”

On February 23, Kendall, 30, had a hemorrhagic stroke at the elementary school where she is a librarian. She spent 10 days in the ICU at Piedmont Columbus Regional Hospital, where she had a craniotomy to relieve pressure and pain from brain swelling.

Kendall arrived at Shepherd Center shaken by the sudden events, desperately missing her two young daughters, and devastated by the loss of function in her left hand and arm.

Her turning point came when she learned Shepherd Center had an arts and crafts space.
A self-described “Jill of all trades,” Kendall says crafting is a core part of her lifelong identity, from sewing and knitting to jewelry and art. It’s why she prioritized anything that would help her regain mobility in her hand.

Kendall’s therapists emphasized recreational therapy to improve her motor skills and uplift her spirits. She made mosaic tiles. She painted. She made bracelets she would give her daughters, Cara, 5, and Gwen, 2, when they visited each weekend. And, yes, she gardened.

“Getting down to that arts and crafts room and seeing what I was capable of was really good for me,” Kendall says. “All the recreational therapy was mentally what I needed to make it through a really hard time.”

She also grew her love for beading while at Shepherd Center. The craft proved painstaking at first, stringing one tiny bead at a time. Eventually, as her hand function returned, her beadwork blossomed. She’s carried her new passion home, too. This summer, she began selling handmade beaded earrings — initially to friends and family, but now they’re available in a local hair salon.

Better yet, beading is another activity she and her kids do together, along with watercolor painting and sewing. “I’m so thankful to be with my kids again,” Kendall says. “Being away from them was the most painful thing of all.”

She’s also reunited with her “other” kids. Kendall returned to some of her library duties at the end of the last school year. This August, she took on a full load of classes as the school librarian, doing the things she’s passionate about with her students — teaching about different genres, talking about how to evaluate reliable sources, and reading the graphic novels many kids love these days.

It’s something Shepherd helped prepare her for, too. Her recreational therapists organized an outing to a local bookstore to practice scenarios she’d eventually encounter back at school.

“That outing made me aware of how things would be different to some degree when I went back to work,” Kendall says. “It helped me anticipate some of the challenges I might face.”

“Of course, it also was nice just being around books again. I’d missed that. I remember I bought quite a few books for me and my kids! That was a really nice outing for this librarian’s soul.”
Visit a Shepherd Smash practice of Shepherd Center’s quad rugby team, and during breaks in the action, you might see Travis Daniel talking with a new fan. Usually, it’s a patient from Shepherd Center’s Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program who might be there watching the sport for the first time — curious if they could play it themselves.

“I love talking with people who come down from inpatient to watch us practice,” Travis says, “because I did the exact same thing.”

Travis, who came to Shepherd with a C-7 spinal cord injury from a snowboarding accident, remembers his first time in the Livingston Gym and seeing banners with different sports teams’ names on them.

“The Shepherd Sluggers? The Shepherd Swords? What is all this?” Travis, 38, recalls asking his recreational therapists.

They are just two of the 10 teams comprising the Fred, Shaler, and Andrew Alias Sports Teams program at Shepherd Center. The sports program allows individuals with physical disabilities to play sports on a recreational or competitive level.

Once Travis learned about the teams, he’d find out their schedules and watch as many practices and games as possible, especially the Shepherd Smash, Shepherd Center’s quad rugby squad.
The physicality and athleticism of the athletes blew him away. But while watching from mere feet away, he sometimes felt like the play in front of him might as well have been happening on a planet a million miles away.

“I’d find myself dreaming about playing on that team,” Travis recalls. “But then I’d think, ‘Right now, I can’t get out of my bed without a Hoyer Lift. How am I supposed to push a rugby chair?’”

Today, Travis has indeed worked his way onto the Shepherd Smash, a testament to his hard work and the therapy he received at Shepherd Center. He’s also a catcher on the Shepherd Sluggers softball team.

But he has not forgotten being the spectator on the sidelines.

“It humbles me to be on the other side now, so I want to be a mentor and an encouragement for those watching me,” he says.

What does he tell current patients who come to watch the Smash?

“ ‘You can do anything you want. There’s always a way,’ Travis says. ‘Don’t let anyone say you can’t do something. Consider that a challenge. Shepherd, man, they opened my eyes to everything. I’ve learned that if you’ve got people willing to help and teach, you can do anything.’”

Of course, it’s not just sports that make for an adventurous life. Travis is a father of three kids — 10, 11, and 14 — and a husband to Brianna. Their shared life in Cumming, Georgia, is all about adventure. There’s “barn life” with the family’s horse, “farm life” with the family’s cattle on a farm in south Forsyth, and plenty of “dog life” with Travis’ new companion Gus, a 100-pound Doberman service dog. There’s also lots of shuttling time, as Travis has started driving the kids to school, church, doctor’s appointments, and their own sports.

All of the adventures are well-documented on Travis’ @c7quadsquad TikTok account, which has more than 8,000 followers who love the family’s candid, heart-warming interactions. His oldest daughter is a frequent and funny interviewer who quizzes her dad on how he gets dressed, gets in his car, and deals with people taking his accessible parking space. One video, of Travis “jumping” in the pool with his kids has more than nine million views.

“We’re living life, that’s for sure!” Travis says. “It’s just a fun way to show folks what’s possible. I’m still here. The Lord ain’t done with me yet. We’re rollin’.”

There’s more to come, too, including lots of travel. Already, the family has taken several post-injury road trips, and soon they’ll head to Chicago for the Wheelchair Softball World Series. They’ll get there by plane, something they didn’t do much of pre-injury. Thankfully, Travis and Brianna participated in a Shepherd Center airport outing to learn how to navigate security, boarding, and much more.

“I’m so glad they did that because I didn’t have a clue how we’d manage it,” Travis says. “We’re ready to go now!”

After rehabilitation at Shepherd Center, Travis Daniel joined the Shepherd Sluggers softball and the Shepherd Smash rugby teams. (left) Travis practices rugby in the Livingston Gym with assistant coach Jonny Rea, ACSM EP-C.
Recreation therapy often means venturing beyond the walls of Shepherd for patients, but it’s not just for patients; it’s for anyone ready for adventure. Climbing in Chattanooga, leisure skills in Charlotte, tennis in Atlanta, virtual art anywhere — these are just some of the many Health and Wellness Clinics Shepherd offers the community.

“You do not have to have gone through any part of the continuum of care at Shepherd to participate in our Health and Wellness Clinics,” explains Katie Murphy, CTRS, Shepherd health and wellness coordinator. “If you need some type of adaptation or modification to participate in leisure recreation activities, we’re here to help problem solve so you can get out and do it.”

In-person clinics allow participants to enjoy expert-led adventures and activities like birding or horticulture or try out gear like specialized sports wheelchairs or mountain bikes.

“The goal is to provide many different opportunities because what you do in your free time and what I do in mine could be very different,” Murphy says. “And we also want to make sure people know about organizations they can work with within their communities to continue to live an active life.”

Grants and partnerships with other organizations with similar goals allow Shepherd to offer a wide variety of clinics, introduce participants to community resources, and keep the cost of clinics low.

Shepherd offers clinics around metro Atlanta and throughout the Southeast. While participants must arrange transportation to and from the clinics, Shepherd staff and partner organizations take care of the other details and provide any necessary equipment. This winter, Shepherd will partner with Wheel the World, an organization specializing in accessible travel experiences, for a trip to Riviera Maya, Mexico.

Closer to home, many participants have requested pickleball clinics, so Murphy plans to add it to the options for next year.

“It’s about getting people out there to try different things that may pique their interest,” Murphy explains.

Scan the QR code and sign up to receive the Health and Wellness Clinic newsletter.
When Ellen Geddes arrived at Shepherd Center in 2011 as a patient in Shepherd Center’s Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program, she had no idea that when she left, she would be on the path to the Paralympics. “I was in the gym during Shepherd’s adaptive fencing practice when the captain asked me if I was interested in trying it out,” Ellen explains. “I tried basketball but was afraid of the ball. I also tried skeet shooting, but it wasn’t stimulating to me. Fencing was the one that stuck.”

Athletic endeavors weren’t new to Ellen. Before her injury, she competed in the equestrian sports eventing and dressage.

After Ellen graduated from the inpatient program and transitioned to Shepherd Center’s outpatient Day Program, she began traveling from her home in Aiken, South Carolina, to Shepherd Center every Saturday for fencing practice. Her hard work paid off, and she was able to attend her first World Cup for adaptive fencing just two years after her injury.

“It was a little like being thrown to the wolves,” Ellen laughs. “But the fact that Shepherd provides support for sports, outside of success and medals, is a great benefit to people learning how to exist post-injury, and that support was why I was able to stick with it and make it to my first World Cup in Montreal.”

From then on, Ellen continued to train hard and compete, winning four bronze and two silver World Cup medals.

She ranked third in the world on the Paralympic ranking list for foil, a lightweight, flexible weapon in which points are earned by touching an opponent’s torso, after competing in the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

“Shepherd Center essentially helped get me to the Paralympics,” she says. “Their support leading up to the Paralympics and chasing all the points we needed in all the World Cups before then was invaluable.”

While Ellen has been successful in her athletic career, she is still working to overcome the anxiety that comes with competition.

“Focus on the process instead of the outcome,” she advises. “And if you want to try a sport and be good at it, be prepared to fail and lose first. Keep grinding it out. That was always a big thought process for me. Don’t give up because you’re not good in the beginning.”

As Ellen continues in her pursuit to qualify for the 2024 Paralympics in Paris, she reflects on her career as an athlete and the effect the para-athletic community has had on her.

“The ability to continue to compete and have people I could communicate with was really helpful to transition to life with a spinal cord injury,” she explains. “With so many teams at Shepherd, you can try all the options and find a community and what you’re good at. We’re fortunate to have that access.”

As former Shepherd Center patient and Parafencing medalist, Ellen Geddes, trains to qualify for the 2024 Paralympics, she shares how adaptive sports helped her adjust to life after injury and go for the gold.

By Lindsey Rieben

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Photos provided by Ellen Geddes
Shepherd Alums:
From “I Can’t” to “I Can”

Cesar Perez
Atlanta, Georgia

At 24, Cesar Perez felt like life was moving in a great direction. In addition to his full-time job, he was working behind the scenes in film, and his acting career was blossoming. On a road trip one weekend, he was seriously injured in a car crash involving an impaired driver. Cesar was stabilized at Fairview Park Hospital in Dublin, Georgia, then airlifted to Atrium Health Navicent in Macon. In addition to many broken bones, he had a traumatic brain injury (TBI). After two weeks in Macon and several surgeries, he transferred to Shepherd Center’s inpatient Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program.

“If there was a reset button, somehow, I pressed it. I had to learn how to breathe, walk, talk, everything all over again,” he recalls.

Cesar, who was in great physical shape before his injury, says, “I knew my body could handle it, but I didn’t understand the brain injury and the fact that my emotions were so rampant.”

He says his family, who dropped everything to be with him, and the Shepherd team were instrumental in his recovery.

“They always pushed me, and that’s what I needed. I knew that we had to be aggressive if I was going to get out of bed and get my life back,” he explains. “Thankfully, I’ve always been a highly motivated, goal-oriented person.”

Of course, there were difficult days.

“I was so depressed for a while; I didn’t have any outlets,” he recalls. “Before my injury, if I felt angry or emotional, I would go to the gym and work out. Now I could barely get out of bed. I want to be transparent; I went through my struggles.”

Cesar’s mom suggested he start writing about his experience and his feelings. “For her, the point wasn’t to write a book; it was to serve as a catharsis.”

But as Cesar began to heal, he re-read his journal and decided that what was written there might help others.

“I realized there was a message I wanted to get across to help people navigate their darkest moments.”

Cesar’s book, Chase the Light, was published last year. He’s working full-time and making a film about his experience. “I don’t know where I would be had it not been for Shepherd Center. Now I’m back to doing what I love. I’m still chasing my dreams and I see that life can still be beautiful despite the trauma and scars. Shepherd gave me that back.”

Amy Ewing
Huntington, New York

When Amy Ewing was 18 and a first-year college student, she sustained a C4-C6 spinal cord injury (SCI) after diving off a pier. She completed inpatient rehabilitation close to home in New York and then came to Shepherd for the Day Program. There, she rediscovered her love for art, working with her therapists to develop ways to hold a paintbrush and even taking classes at Callanwolde, a local Atlanta fine arts center.

“That’s how I started getting back into art,” she recalls, “which gave me the courage to pursue an art degree.”

Amy’s care team also connected her with an organization that trained service dogs.

“They had a dog ready who preferred females, and they wanted someone who would be active, so they contacted Shepherd Center, and the head of the Day Program at the time said, ‘I have the perfect person for you.’”

Amy’s service dog, Rebel, made a big difference in her life.

“He helped me through a tough period and transition. Having Rebel changed my outlook and helped me to be more outgoing, especially going to school. He got to know everyone in art school and became part of the class.”

Since graduating college, Amy has worked many years as a painter and freelance web designer. Recently, she began her master’s degree in creative business leadership through an online program at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD).

“I want to get into interior design or service design for the medical field and design for patients with disabilities in medical facilities. I want to figure out where I can do the most good and have the most impact,” Amy explains.

Now 37, Amy returns to Shepherd for several weeks most years for Beyond Therapy®, an activity-based program designed to promote lifelong wellness. Amy was one of the early participants when Beyond Therapy began.

“I’m still very close with some of the original members, and I love it and appreciate it every time I go. Probably one of the best parts about Shepherd is the positivity of the people. It’s a support group for my caregiver too. It’s incredible the support system we have at Shepherd. Aside from a physical refresher, returning for Beyond Therapy is an emotional serotonin booster. It really is good for the heart and soul too.”

By Ruth Underwood
Iliana Bermudez
Miami, Florida

Iliana Bermudez is one of five children in a close-knit family. She and her husband have a four-year-old daughter, and Iliana works as a sports journalist, a job she enjoys so much that she says it doesn’t feel like work.

Twelve years ago, at 28, when Iliana was living and working in Connecticut, she felt a pain in her neck that wouldn’t go away. Then, she noticed a tingling feeling in her hands. Her doctor suspected a pinched nerve and scheduled an MRI, but while Iliana waited for the results, her left arm began to feel heavy. Her mom, who came for a visit and to check on her, noticed Iliana’s leg was dragging when she walked.

“It happened really fast,” Iliana recalls. “Within a week, I was unable to move the left side of my body.”

Iliana was diagnosed with neuromyelitis optica (NMO), an autoimmune disease that causes inflammation of the spinal cord and optic nerves. She had difficulty walking and started to use a wheelchair. Knowing she would need help and support, she moved back to Atlanta to be closer to family. A neurologist recommended the Andrew C. Carlos Multiple Sclerosis Institute at Shepherd Center. There, she saw Ben Thrower, M.D., the medical director of the MS Institute.

“When it all happened, it was scary because I didn’t really know what was going on. But Dr. Thrower was great. He helped me better understand NMO, and he said there was help. It made things easier. I have to say there was a before and after meeting Dr. Thrower.

Before, it was a little confusing. Afterward, he made everything clear and calm,” Iliana explains.

Based on Dr. Thrower’s recommendations, Iliana began physical therapy. She also visits the MS Institute every six months to get an intravenous infusion of medication to reduce her NMO symptoms and see a member of the MS Institute team. Even though she only sees them every six months, she says many staff members are like family to her.

Iliana’s career led her to move with her family to Miami. With her symptoms in check, she is walking again and even enjoying spin classes. She has returned to the activities she loves – spending time with family, traveling, and working. Last year, her travel for work included trips to Tokyo, New Zealand, and Qatar, and she won a Sports Emmy® Award, her fourth!

But no matter where she goes, Iliana says she will continue to travel to Shepherd for treatment. “If I move across the world, I will still come back to Shepherd Center because this place is amazing.”

Bob Suter
Colbert, Georgia

Bob Suter, a nurse, avid reader, and dog trainer, served in the United States Marine Corps from 2001 until 2009, including three tours in Iraq. Following his service, he was diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Bob has experienced symptoms from the brain injury for years, especially vision and balance issues, but he did his best to ignore them. He also struggled with PTSD, which made him feel on edge and angry, what he calls “white knuckling life.”

“My body is constantly sending the signal — alert, alert, alert — and that’s all you get, that’s all you feel,” he explains.

Then, after a hip injury and bouts with COVID, his symptoms started worsening.

“I couldn’t balance on stairs, and at the same time, I was unable to control my emotions.

I would just start crying,” he recalls, “and the folks at SHARE told me this is not uncommon — ignored passing out, ignored balance issues, ignored headaches, ignored all that, but the moment that I couldn’t stop crying, I was like, oh, something is really wrong with me. I don’t cry.”

Bob attended SHARE in 2022 and says it was a reality check that has made a big difference in his life.

“One of my struggles is recognizing that I am not superhuman and can’t always push through and do whatever I want. And SHARE helped me change my perspective. I’ve slowed down.”

Physical and occupational therapy sessions helped Bob work on his vision and balance issues. And he credits a simple office procedure called a sphenopalatine block, in which a local anesthetic is delivered through the nasal passages to block a cluster of nerves behind the face, with making his PTSD symptoms more manageable. With fewer PTSD symptoms, he was able to put other tools he learned at SHARE into practice.

Knowing others have had similar experiences also helped.

“Before you go to SHARE, it feels like you’re the only person on earth dealing with these issues, and you often hear that you’re making it up, that you’re being ridiculous,” Bob says.

“And then you go there, and all these other people are dealing with the exact same things, and they relate.

They’re telling their story, but it’s yours. That’s my story right there, coming out of someone else’s mouth.”

Bob also felt the SHARE team understood him.

“There’s something about the entire staff at SHARE,” Bob says. “They give you that feeling of, ‘Yeah, we know, it’s real’ — and they know exactly what they need to do to make it better. They have a gift.”
Empowering Adventure

Adventure Skills Workshop provides a supportive environment to try something new, instilling confidence, creating community, and fostering fun.
Twenty-one-year-old Austin Hagel almost skipped Shepherd Center’s Adventure Skills Workshop (ASW) because of a scheduling conflict, but his mom, Jennifer Haertling, encouraged him to put himself, and ASW, first.

On the third weekend in May, Austin, his mom, and his stepdad drove from their home in Steeleville, Illinois, to Camp ASCCA, a wheelchair-accessible facility on Lake Martin in Jackson’s Gap, Alabama, for ASW.

The annual event, open to Shepherd patients and community members, gives people with spinal cord injury (SCI), acquired brain injury (ABI), multiple sclerosis (MS), and other neurological injuries or illnesses the opportunity to enjoy a weekend of summer camp.

From water skiing to climbing wall and zip line, participants can practice activities they’ve always loved or try something new. This year’s camp included participants aged 19 to 67 from 10 states. And there were lots of first-timers, including Austin.

Austin, who sustained a C5-C7 spinal cord injury (SCI) in a car crash and uses a wheelchair, didn’t go through rehabilitation at Shepherd Center, but his mom heard great things about ASW through a friend she met on a Facebook support group. He is glad they made the trip.

“It was awesome. It was my first time doing any stuff like that. I’d gone zip lining before my injury, but other than that, I had never tried some of the activities,” he says.

The camp started with a barbecue lunch for campers, their families, and Shepherd staff provided by Brasfield & Gorrie General Contractors, the first corporate partner of ASW. The company also provided goodie bags for each camper, stocked with a towel, hat, water bottle, and other supplies for the weekend. Twenty Brasfield & Gorrie employees volunteered to help campers with their bags as they arrived and to serve lunch. After lunch, volunteers enjoyed a tour of the camp to see ASW activities in action. Taylor Nester, project manager at Brasfield & Gorrie, was one of the volunteers.

“Serving ASW campers and their families was an incredible opportunity for our team. Seeing the campers in action skiing, tubing, climbing, zip lining and so much more was truly inspiring. We are thankful to Shepherd Center for providing us with opportunities to be involved in their life-changing programs, both through this experience and as we build their new Arthur M. Blank Family Residences,” Taylor said.

Long-time Shepherd supporters Melinda Dabbiere and Juli Owens also hosted guests of the Foundation who joined the camp tour.

In addition to the 200 people at the camp for the weekend, including attendees, caregivers, family members, Shepherd Center staff, donors and volunteers, and the Shepherd family, there were seven furry friends from Shepherd partner Canine Companions. The dogs mingled with ASW participants to bring smiles and give participants a chance to learn more about service dogs first-hand (or paw).

After passing his swim test, Austin was the first participant to try out water skiing in the somewhat chilly water of Lake Jackson. During the weekend, he also went jet skiing, zip lining, and clay shooting, which was one of his favorite activities, especially since he has shooting experience from his service in the National Guard.

“To know that I am still able to do that, after my injury, is really awesome,” Austin explains.

But beyond the activities, something else stood out for Austin.

“Honestly, my favorite thing was how the staff knew exactly what they were doing in dealing with spinal cord injuries. It was really nice not having to tell people what to do, not having to worry about that,” he recalls.

And Jennifer saw how that support boosted Austin’s confidence both that weekend and since he’s returned home.

“Everybody understood what you’re going through. I think it was the first time he started to feel normal again. Being in this environment was good for him, and it gave him the confidence to try more things,” Jennifer explains. “They don’t act like the injuries are the end of life as you thought it was going to be. It is going to look different, but you can still have some of the same dreams, and you can figure out how to do things.”

When she discovered Austin was into sports, Kelly Edens, CTRS, Shepherd Center’s recreation therapy manager, arranged for him to try a sports wheelchair.

“I loved that chair — it turned so quickly. It made me see that I could do more things like that closer to home, like wheelchair rugby,” Austin explains.

For Jennifer, the weekend was also a boost.

“I think as a parent getting to meet other parents and having people from Shepherd who understand what you’re going through, and the different phases people are in, is helpful,” she explains.

But the best part for her was seeing her son enjoy the weekend.

“Every time he smiled was my favorite memory, and that happened a lot.”
On Friday, June 16, the ProMotion Fitness Center at Shepherd was abuzz with a different kind of activity than its usual exercise and therapy. Hair and makeup artists had set up shop and were busy consulting and styling patients and alums from Shepherd’s Adolescent Rehabilitation Program. A disco ball sparkled above a stage in the Livingston Gym. Everyone was getting ready for Project Rollway — a big night of fun and fashion.

This year Shepherd marked the 10th anniversary of Project Rollway, an event benefitting the hospital’s Adolescent Rehabilitation Program, which focuses on returning teenagers to the highest level of functioning and independence possible after spinal cord or brain injury. The event is designed to celebrate current and former adolescent patients.

“It’s a moment to showcase the adolescents and give them something other than their injuries to focus on because this is not something they normally do,” says event co-chair Ashley Kim, MPT, ATC, who led the adolescent rehabilitation team in organizing the event.

Henry “Hank” Devaney, who completed inpatient rehabilitation at Shepherd after sustaining spinal cord and brain injuries in a motor vehicle accident, was one of this year’s models. Even though his discharge date was just a few weeks before Project Rollway, he and his mom made the trip back to Atlanta from his home in Salem, New Hampshire, because Henry was excited to participate.

“When they asked him to be a model, it really lit a spark with him,” Henry’s mom, Jennifer Spampinato, recalls. “I doubt there was anything else that would have gotten Henry on that plane, and that did, so, it was really awesome to have the opportunity. The effort...
that went into it to make these kids feel so special was really incredible.”

Jennifer Jordan, whose son Jared was also a model, loved the star treatment participants received. “They felt special, and it showed on stage,” she says.

Twenty-six participants modeled clothing from local and national retailers, including Elk Head Clothing, Megan Huntz, Onward Reserve, Patagonia, and The London Trading Company.

The mix of current patients and Shepherd alums is essential.

“The adolescents meet peers from spinal cord injury and brain injury rehabilitation. Because patients from throughout the last year participate, current patients can meet someone who has been home for a little while and hear about their experience. And for alums, it’s a chance to come back, ask questions, and reconnect with their therapists,” Kim explains.

For participant Jared Jordan, the opportunity to reconnect was the highlight.

“We had a big group of people who were all at Shepherd at the same time, and the therapists that we had are still there, so just being able to see them, talk to them, and catch up was my favorite part,” Jared explains.

Cheryl Linden, LPC, OT, was the emcee for the evening, sharing a little of each adolescent’s story, including their plans for the future and how they’d spend a perfect day. Some patient family members spoke about their experiences at Shepherd.

An extra special moment in an evening full of memorable moments was the celebration of the life of Eli Griffin, a patient who passed away after his discharge from Shepherd. Eli’s younger sister, Lynie, modeled an outfit, and Eli’s father, Derek Pilkinton, shared some of Eli’s story and strength, remembering that instead of asking “Why me?” of the adversity he had faced, Eli said, “Why not me, I’m strong.”

Four hundred tickets were sold for the event. And adolescents and their families, as well as Shepherd staff, have priceless memories of the evening.

“It’s important for the adolescents to see that their life doesn’t have to be about their injury,” Kim says. “It’s important to the staff because they want to see people succeed, and they don’t always get to see them after discharge from inpatient, outside of the walls of Shepherd. It’s why we work here. It’s the Shepherd way.”

Thank You
to our models, their families, Shepherd Center staff, and everyone who made this event possible!

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Haug Barron Law Group, LLC

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Lynda Justi
Natasha Jenkins
Sam Henry
Kaitlyn Radler
Morgan Hughes
Rachel Simononis
Sarah Fox

Photographers
Drew Oswald
Laura Barnard

DJ
Jewels Beats
It’s been several years since Shepherd’s Adolescent Rehabilitation program hosted a reunion for past patients. The team planned a weekend for the summer of 2020, but the pandemic meant the gathering wasn’t an option.

This year’s reunion invites went to adolescents who completed their rehab from 2019 to 2022. And Friday, June 16, 43 former patients from all over the Southeast converged in Atlanta for a fun weekend and an opportunity to reconnect.

“It was cool to see some of the friendships we saw develop during their early stages of rehab still flourishing. And to see families reconnecting — because they were each other’s support groups while they were here and they bonded,” explains Debra Eldred, Shepherd speech-language pathologist (SLP), who headed organizing the event.

The weekend, sponsored by Shepherd Center partner Andee’s Army, kicked off Friday night with a Project Rollway watch party in the Callaway Auditorium on Shepherd Center’s 7th floor. Alums and their families enjoyed a buffet-style dinner including Southern staples like fried chicken, barbecue, and mac and cheese. Former patients received swag bags, with backpacks and crossbody bags from the JanSport adaptive line. Then they watched a live stream of the Project Rollway fashion show taking place in the Livingston Gym.

Saturday morning, participants were invited to a college and career fair. Shepherd specialists were on hand to provide tips on interviewing, resumes, and college accommodations. Alums had the opportunity to talk to representatives from leading companies, local colleges, and outside supporting services, including the Institute on Human Development and Disability at UGA, a college counselor, and a career counselor.

Later that afternoon, alums and guests traveled to Truist Park to watch the Atlanta Braves soundly defeat the Colorado Rockies. Shepherd alum Jack Trottier, who hand-cycled more than 1,200 miles from Massachusetts to Shepherd Center to raise funds for Shepherd Center’s Adolescent Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program and completed his journey on Friday, June 16, also joined the outing.

“He has been out of Shepherd a little bit longer, and it was nice to see him interact with our previous adolescents and just talk,” says Eldred.

Hattie Callison completed rehabilitation at Shepherd Center in 2021 following a spinal cord and traumatic brain injury. She and her mom made an eight-hour trip from West Virginia for the reunion. Hattie attended all the weekend’s events and enjoyed catching up with everyone.

“I think it’s important to have a weekend like this to get out of the house and out of your comfort zone, catch up with everyone, and most importantly, just to enjoy yourself,” Hattie says.

Eldred says the weekend is also a boost for Shepherd staff.

“We see our adolescents at the beginning of their journeys, right after their injuries. And to see them, three or four years later, thriving and to hear them say, ‘I’m able to do this because you all pushed me, and you guys knew I had it in me’ — it’s a big boost for us and a reminder of why we come to work every day.”
The heat and humidity were characteristically high in the early morning hours of July 4 as athletes made their way to the starting line of Shepherd Center’s Wheelchair Division of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race. But that didn’t stop the 58 elite athletes – some of whom are former Shepherd Center patients – from participating in America’s largest 10K road race. Daniel Romanchuk, 24, of Champaign, Illinois, won the race for the sixth year in a row with an impressive time of 19:28. Aaron Pike and Joshua Cassidy finished second and third, respectively. The top three finishers in the women’s division were Susannah Scaroni, 32, also of Champaign, Illinois, who finished in 22:11, closely followed by Kendall Gretsch and Yen Hoang.

As part of a favorite July 4 tradition, Shepherd Center patients, families, and staff lined the sidewalk in front of the hospital, cheering and passing out Shepherd Center sweatbands to help with the heat as racers completed the stretch of the race known as “Cardiac Hill.”

After the race, the athletes enjoyed a festive brunch with patients and their families at Shepherd Center.

“It’s inspiring for the patients to meet these athletes,” says Becky Washburn, MS, the wellness and ProMotion manager at Shepherd Center who coordinates the Wheelchair Division. “And it also gives the athletes the opportunity to demonstrate to patients that this is something that can be achieved.”

(A clockwise from top, left) Elizabeth Pentecost (center), a Shepherd patient, and physical therapists Brittany Stewart, PT, DPT, CBIS, CSRS (L), and Taylor Galmirini, PT, DPT, NCS, NCPT (R), handed out sweatbands to racers. ► Susannah Scaroni won the women’s open division of the 2023 Shepherd Center’s AJC Peachtree Road Race Wheelchair Division. ► Shepherd patients and staff cheered the racers on from the sidewalk. ► Daniel Romanchuk won the men’s open division of the 2023 Shepherd Center’s AJC Peachtree Road Race Wheelchair Division.
Derby Day '23
Another Great Success

This year’s annual party delights attendees.

Sipping on mint juleps, playing lawn games, bidding on exclusive auction items, and — of course — the Kentucky Derby were just some of the highlights of this year’s Derby Day, held on May 6 at Chastain Horse Park.

This year, all activities were held in the outdoor equestrian ring, and the venue was made more accessible by installing large access matting over the rough terrain and ramps where needed. Tents housed food and drink stations, as well as tables for silent auction items. A mixologist treated guests to mint juleps and other specialty drinks. Party-goers could also play corn hole, wine toss, and casino games. Giant TV screens broadcast the 149th running of the Kentucky Derby.

Julie Shepherd was the chair of the event, supported by Shepherd Center Foundation staff members Shanna Thorpe and Lisa Ruger.

“Derby Day was a beautiful event,” says Rachel Simononis, a first-time Derby Day volunteer who was in charge of the raffle and silent auction this year. “The committee chairs worked tirelessly, focusing on every detail. It was incredible to see everyone’s hard work come together for a successful day.”

Silent auction and raffle items included a Big Green Egg, tickets to Atlanta Braves and Atlanta United games, and classes donated by Pepper Boxing.

“We are grateful for each person, organization, and business for their generosity,” Rachel says.

This year’s Derby Day grossed $200,000 to support Shepherd Center’s Recreation Therapy Program, which is donor-funded. The largest program of its kind in the country, recreation therapists help people lead healthy and active lives as independently as possible through recreation activities, providing education, skill development, and community reintegration opportunities.

Next year’s Derby Day — its 40th anniversary — is slated for May 4, 2024 at the Chastain Horse Park. Rachel Simononis will be at the helm, serving as chair.

“I am looking forward to honoring Alana Shepherd, and the Shepherd family, in addition to highlighting the Recreation Therapy Program,” Rachel says of next year’s event. “It is a program that is not covered by a patient’s insurance, and providing it to patients would not be possible without the generosity of donors and events such as Derby Day.”

(Above) Alexander Kaufman, volunteer Rachel Simononis, Julie Shepherd, and Andrew Louw gathered for a photo. (lower right) Guests Rosane and Garrett Gravesen came decked out in their Derby Day finest. (below) Derby Day guests enjoyed a beautiful day, food, drinks, and fun, and watched underdog Mage win the 149th Kentucky Derby.

By Sara Baxter

Photos by Naomi Alexis
(Above) Volunteer Rachel Simononis and Shepherd case managers Shereena Rodney, Burnise Charpentier, and Ryan Pitts share a laugh.

Derby Day ’23
Another Great Success
On April 12, 2023, Shepherd’s Men and The Charlie Daniels Journey Home Project held a joint fundraising event featuring country music star Chris Young. The special evening was held at the home of long-time Shepherd supporters Kelly and Toby Regal. Guests enjoyed signature cocktails and gourmet food from Atlanta restaurant Local Three, beers from Reformation Brewery, a stellar live auction, and the opportunity to purchase handcrafted boots and knives.

Superstar Randy Travis joined Chris Young as they graciously posed for souvenir photos and shared stories and conversation with the audience. The highlight of the evening was Chris’s performance of many of his top hits in an intimate backyard concert, ending with Chris singing one of Randy’s most famous songs, “Forever and Ever, Amen,” joined stage-side by Randy, who provided the final “Amen,” and a moving moment for the guests.

Shepherd’s Men co-founder, Travis Ellis, served as emcee and auctioneer. Guest speakers included SHARE graduates Gary Herber and Glen Wells. The event raised nearly $300,000 for Shepherd’s Men and The Charlie Daniels Journey Home Project. For information on upcoming Shepherd’s Men events, follow @shepherdsmen on X, formerly known as Twitter, and Instagram.
Music fans, beer lovers, and patriots gathered on April 21-22, 2023, for the inaugural Murphy Music & Brews in Murphy, North Carolina. The event was the brainchild of Buck Bald Brewing Co. proprietor Patrick Keenan and Shepherd’s Men co-founder Travis Ellis. On Friday, Patrick, who operates Buck Bald Brewing locations in Copper Hill, Tennessee, and Murphy, North Carolina, hosted a Shepherd’s Men fundraising auction and live acoustic performance by local artist Shannon York at his Copper Hill brewery. To the crowd’s delight, Drivin’ N’ Cryin’ frontman Kevn Kenny joined Shannon for a surprise mini-set of the band’s most famous hits.

On Saturday, Murphy closed a main street for Murphy Music & Brews, featuring dozens of craft beers from Buck Bald and other local breweries, food trucks, and three live bands performing on a stage in the middle of the town. Hundreds of fans traveled from Tennessee, northwest Georgia, and North Carolina to enjoy the event and learn about Shepherd’s Men, Shepherd Center’s SHARE Military Initiative, and the challenges veterans, service members, and first responders face with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and mental health concerns, including post-traumatic stress.

Hu$hMoney, an Atlanta cover band featuring Shepherd’s Men member Tony Da Vita on lead guitar, opened the concert. Next, War Hippies, a country rock band featuring U.S. Army veteran Danny Reis and Scooter Brown, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, performed songs from their albums and tour setlist. Atlanta’s own Drivin’ N’ Cryin’ closed the festival with an hour-long set of favorites. For information about Shepherd’s Men and their events, please visit shepherdsmen.com.
When Shepherd Center’s annual joint board meeting on May 8 was called to order, the sound of a whistle greeted attendees as Shepherd’s wheelchair basketball team — Shepherd Stealers — rolled out onto the court for a short exhibition game. The Shepherd Stealers are part of the Fred, Shaler, and Andrew Atlas Sports Teams program — a vital part of the donor-funded recreation therapy program.

Following the scrimmage, team captain Gavin Cloy reflected on how joining the team opened doors for him. “I got an education, traveled the world as part of the USA Wheelchair Basketball Team, and met the love of my life.” Gavin shared. “Our team’s motto is ‘next play,’ meaning what is done is done, and now we are going to move forward. I also hope that translates to people’s lives outside of basketball. This scrimmage allowed our guests to see how hard the team works and how far we have come beyond our injuries.”

Matt Edens, Shepherd Center’s director of athletic teams, gave a history of recreation therapy. Sarah Morrison, Shepherd Center’s CEO, continued the meeting with highlights of progress across the organization. The meeting concluded with Alana Shepherd, Shepherd Center co-founder and chairman of the Board of Directors, thanking everyone for their continued support.

Shepherd Stealers Steal the Show

Board members were treated to a basketball scrimmage during a recent joint meeting.

By Sara Baxter and Liza Vega-Smart

(Clockwise from top, left) During the joint Board meeting, Alexander Roman, Rashad Bennett, and Gavin Cloy fight for the ball in a Shepherd Stealers exhibition scrimmage. Shepherd Stealer Patria Brown makes a move toward the basket while Board members look on. Gavin Cloy moves the ball up the court for the winning basket. Board members mingle before the start of the May meeting.
During the pandemic, one of the most common questions Alex Seblatnigg, CAVS, CPXP, Shepherd Center’s director of volunteer services and internal engagement, would get is, “When are the volunteers coming back?” And the only answer she could give them was “as soon as we can.”

That day came on March 21, 2021 — nearly a year after the pandemic forced the hospital to discontinue the volunteer program. A small group of volunteers returned to help feed patients breakfast — a vital job that allows nurses and staff members to perform other duties and keeps the patient’s therapy schedule on track.

“It was such an exciting day,” Seblatnigg remembers. “There was great fanfare and the staff was so happy to see them again.”

Since then, Seblatnigg and her team have slowly welcomed volunteers back in stages. Existing volunteers were invited back first, and she opened it up to new volunteers in March 2022 when they held the first new volunteer orientation since before the pandemic. In January 2023, the last group — volunteers who staff the welcome desk — returned.

“I am very grateful that so many wanted to come back,” she says. “It finally feels like we are back to normal.”

It is especially important, Seblatnigg says, because they play such a vital role at Shepherd Center.

“The volunteers add a different element of warmth, kindness, and happiness,” she says. “They become friends, and they have such an impact on both the patients and the staff.”

In addition to the return of individual volunteers, events that give groups the opportunity to volunteer are back. Groups can host engaging events for patients and families, including ice cream socials or bingo nights.

To learn more about volunteering at Shepherd Center visit shepherd.org/volunteer.
In June, Shepherd honored Tammy King, Shepherd Center’s chief nursing officer (CNO), and one of the hospital’s first employees with a retirement party celebrating 47 years of hard work, compassion, and humor.

Deceased friends of Shepherd Center are listed first in bold print followed by the names of those making gifts in their memory. This list reflects gifts made to Shepherd Center between April 1, 2023 and June 30, 2023.

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Dr. and Mrs. David F. Apple, Jr.
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Ms. Johanna Ellis Reisinger
Mrs. Janis E. Esch
Mr. Kevin M. Esch
The Team at Susan Ferrier Interiors
Dr. and Mrs. John C. Garrett
Mr. and Mrs. S. T. Glover
Mr. and Mrs. Scott D. Hawkins
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Mr. and Mrs. Douglas J. Hertz
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Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan G. Roxland
Mrs. Alana S. Shepherd
Mr. and Mrs. James H. Shepherd III
Ms. Julie H. Shepherd and Mr. Andrew Louw
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Mr. and Mrs. James C. McElroy, Sr.
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Pascarelli
Dr. and Mrs. Edwin C. Pound III
Mrs. Alana S. Shepherd
Patients from Shepherd’s Spinal Cord Injury Day Program worked toward their therapy goals by cycling on the Silver Comet Trail.

Marilyn Brandon loves flying airplanes, so her physical therapist, Heather Jones, took Marilyn and her husband to the Dekalb-Peachtree Airport to practice getting in and out of a plane.
Former Shepherd Center patient and Florida Fire Chief Rob McGilloway, pictured with occupational therapist Graylyn Jones, gave a presentation on fire safety for Shepherd Center staff and patients.

Nathan Andrew Hurst  
Mr. and Mrs. Edwin R. Hudson

Jarrett Jenkins  
The Diaz Family  
Tabitha Goodwin  
Ross & Angela Haynes  
Kira Jenkins  
Alonda Massey  
Chris and Reniqua Spellman  
Michael Spelmon  
Archie Watson  
Avery and Deitra Watson  
Havin Watson  
Keith Watson

Jason Daniel Jones  
Ms. Evelyn Bright  
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Mr. and Mrs. Philip C. Henry  
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Mrs. Alana S. Shepherd

Ritchie Williams  
Gina Greco and Gaetano DeLeonibus

Elizabeth "Libby" Wood  
Mrs. Alana S. Shepherd
Honorees are listed first in bold print followed by the names of those making gifts in their honor. This list reflects gifts made to Shepherd Center between April 1, 2023 and June 30, 2023.

Julie Bright
Mr. and Mrs. David M. Jones

Leslie Brindle
Mr. and Mrs. Charles R. Snyder

Susan Brouillette
Ms. Susanne E. Shepherd

Katie and Johnny’s Marriage
Ms. Mary Houston
Ms. Johanna Shadoin
Ms. Melanie Smith Sauza

James Curtis
Mr. and Mrs. Francis M. Craft II
Mr. and Mrs. James M. Wells III

Reagan Eudy
Mr. Michael Leonard

David Ewing
Mr. Timothy Ewing

Dr. Fadia and the Staff at Pathways
Faith Hope & Love Trust

Dr. Edelle Field Fote
Emory University

Florence Discussion Club
Mr. and Mrs. Tom Frith

Scott Gordon, Sr.
Mr. and Mrs. Scott Gordon

Jared Grier
Mr. and Mrs. Eugene L. Pearce III

Lori S. Hagy
Mr. and Mrs. Edwin R. Hagy, USMC (Retired)

Benjamin Harmon
Georgia Power Foundation, Inc.

Connie Hart
Ms. Cynthia Kelley

Adam Hester
Ms. Angela Hester

Shaneika Hillman
Ms. Bonnie Hillman

Nicolas Horne
Mr. Dameon Horne

Alex Howard – Congratulations on your graduation!
Mrs. Marie Landis

Michael J. Hull’s Birthday
Ms. Marjorie Hull

Mary Huntz’s Service
Mr. and Mrs. Deepak Raghavan

Shepherd Center welcomed former patient Jack Trottier after he hand-cycled more than 1,200 miles through 11 states. He partnered with the High Fives Foundation to raise funds for Shepherd Center’s Adolescent Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program.

Sean Abercrombie
Ms. Jenny Brown

Dr. David Apple, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. Christopher R. Hardage
Mr. and Mrs. George L. Hewes

Mitchell Arogeti
Mrs. Sam Arogeti

Alan Leigh Baier
Mr. and Mrs. Thomas O. Powell

Thomas Bailey
LightBay Capital

Duncan Beard
Ms. Jean R. Adams

Dr. Angela Beninga
Mr. Wesley Biddy
Mr. Paul Martin

Eric Bernath’s Birthday
Mr. and Mrs. Paul Kulbersh

Therapists and Staff of Beyond Therapy
Faith Hope & Love Trust

Cade Bloodworth
Jonathan and Marlo Ward

Mariah Neibert was set on attending the Taylor Swift concert, and with the help of her therapy team, she made it to the show. She even met with her occupational therapist, Katie Kimball, for a quick picture.
We're Listening

If you are an outside (non-Shepherd employee) vendor, case manager, interpreter, or another stakeholder, we would like your feedback on your experience with Shepherd Center. Please scan the QR code with the camera on your phone to participate in a quick survey. Thank you!

For a paper survey, contact Jacqueline Baron-Lee, Ph.D., CPHQ, PMP, director of quality and outcomes management, at Jacqueline.Baron-Lee@shepherd.org or 404-367-1359.
Since Sabrina McCoy and her husband returned to Mississippi following her stroke rehabilitation at Shepherd, they have continued working hard. During Mardi Gras, Sabrina received the honor of being crowned queen of a Mardi Gras ball.
Peachtree Dunwoody Oral & Facial Surgery has placed orders for pecans through Pecans on Peachtree™, averaging about 80 orders. The pecans are both delicious gifts, as well as packed beautifully," says Susan Buchwald, the company’s marketing director. “More importantly, it is supporting a wonderful cause!”

Started in 1982 by Shepherd Center auxiliary members who sold pecans out of the trunks of their cars, the program has grown significantly over its more than 40-year existence.

Pecans on Peachtree raises an average of $200,000 a year, and net proceeds support invaluable programs that benefit patients and families. Pearson Farm, a family business in Fort Valley, Georgia, provides the pecans. Pearson Farm offers pecans in every imaginable flavor to please every taste. Customers can choose from individual packages as well as a variety of gift baskets. Corporate orders – such as those from Peachtree Dunwoody Oral & Facial Surgery – make up about 60% of sales.

“We feel strongly about supporting Shepherd Center for many reasons,” Susan says. “Shepherd Center has a wonderful rehabilitative program, and we like that we can support the patients and the clinical staff.”

For more information, check out pecansonpeachtree.org.