

A catastrophic injury

or illness may change a person's life in many ways, but it doesn't have to change it in every way. More and more, Shepherd Center patients are returning home after rehabilitation to resume the same careers, family responsibilities and leisure activities they had before being hospitalized.

Through Shepherd's innovative treatment programs, patients from across the nation undergo therapies customized to meet their individual needs and interests. For example, therapeutic recreation focuses on rebuilding skills for everyday living, such as shopping and dining out, as well as training for a wide variety of hobbies and sports, from gardening and photography to camping and scuba diving. In addition, Shepherd's Beyond Therapy program is available to those who want to build strength, improve function and maximize recovery through a more rigorous physical therapy approach.

Following are stories about five former Shepherd Center patients who have successfully returned to lives that are productive and meaningful. They may be different people from different places and different backgrounds, but what they share in common is a strong determination to succeed.

LEFT: Kelsey Tainsh, right, of Winter Park, Fla., will graduate from Winter Park High School this year, along with her two triplet sisters, Erica, left, and Valerie, center. Kelsey underwent rehabilitation at Shepherd Center following a stroke that caused complete paralysis on the right side of her body. **ABOVE:** Through Shepherd Center's therapeutic recreation program, former spinal cord injury patient Chad Turcotte of Sidney, Maine, relearned skills to drive a four-wheeler, operate a riding lawn mower, and handle guns and fishing gear safely.



REDISCOVERING OUTSIDE INTERESTS

Central Maine is home to rugged sports such as hiking, hunting, fishing, skiing and snowmobiling. When Chad Turcotte, a native of the area and avid outdoorsman, sustained a paralyzing T-7 spinal cord injury and mild brain injury in an April 2004 car accident, his life turned upside down. "I thought I'd never be able to do the things I enjoyed the most," he recalls. "It felt like my life was over."

Chad quickly realized his life wasn't over when he came to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation. Chad and his parents chose Shepherd based on a recommendation from a family friend, and early into treatment, Chad's therapists assured him he'd return to normal activities and favorite pastimes. He underwent a full range of physical, occupational and cognitive therapies to build physical strength and regain memory function. Through Shepherd's therapeutic recreation program, Chad also relearned skills to operate a riding lawn mower, drive a four-wheeler, and handle guns and fishing gear safely.

Today the 27 year-old is back in Maine, living in his own newly built home. In warm weather, Chad rides his four-wheeler in the woods and fishes in area lakes and rivers. In winter, he goes snowmobiling every chance he gets, and even drives his snowmobile across a frozen lake to get to the accessible shelter he uses for ice fishing. He also enjoys hunting and is permitted to shoot from his van, which is customized with hand controls and wheelchair access.

Another focus in Chad's life is his career. Before being injured, he was a carpenter on commercial building projects. No longer able to handle those physical demands, he's now enrolled in classes three days a week to learn computer-aided drafting and design. "I want to stay involved in construction," he says. "There aren't many people in design who have building experience, so I hope to bring a real-world perspective to this side of the business. I'm also very interested in working on projects that involve accessibility issues."

Chad's accident and recovery have helped him focus on what's important in life – his family and friends, and finding a meaningful vocation. "I love my life right now and want to enjoy each day," he says. "I've learned not to take so much for granted."

Returns

BY CATHY HOLLEMAN



Photo by Diane Hinchcliff

"I thank God for everything I learned at Shepherd. I wouldn't be as independent today if I hadn't been pushed to work so hard during my rehab." -Erin Hagy Buchanan

ABOVE: Erin Hagy Buchanan of Florence, Miss., is the mother of 6-month-old Abygail Gladys ("Abbye") Buchanan. Erin, a former spinal cord injury patient, credits Shepherd Center's rigorous therapy regimen for strengthening her, both physically and emotionally, to meet the daily challenges of living in a wheelchair.

MOTHERING MATTERS

One of the scariest days in the life of Erin Hagy Buchanan, 31, was the day she left Shepherd Center, she says. After sustaining a T-12/L-1 incomplete spinal cord injury in a 2001 car crash in Tennessee, she came to Shepherd for rehabilitation. "In the hospital, there was always someone at the end of a button I could push for help," she recalls. "I knew it wouldn't be that easy in the outside world."

There's little need for safety nets and help buttons in Erin's life today. Now a mother to 6-month-old Abygail Gladys ("Abbye"), Erin spends her days the way most stay-at-home moms do – caring for her young daughter, grocery shopping, doing household chores and relaxing when she can with husband Shawn. Erin credits Shepherd's rigorous therapy regimen for strengthening her, both physically and emotionally, to meet the daily challenges of living in a wheelchair. After leaving Shepherd, she returned to work as an LPN before becoming a stay-at-home mom.

"I thank God for everything I learned at Shepherd," Erin says. "I wouldn't be as independent today if I hadn't been pushed to work so hard during my rehab."

In therapy, Erin learned she could do most of the things she had done before her accident, but she had to do them differently. During her two-month treatment at Shepherd, she learned to dress herself, transfer to and from her wheelchair, cook meals, and manage diet and medications. She also gained the skills and the confidence to return to everyday activities such as grocery shopping, eating out, driving a car and gardening.

Less than two years after her accident, Erin met her husband Shawn and moved to his home in Florence, Miss., after their marriage in 2004. Becoming pregnant with Abbye two and half years later was a dream come true for the couple.

"I had a normal, healthy pregnancy and only gained 10 extra pounds," Erin says. "Being in a wheelchair forces me to watch what I eat, and that was especially important when I had Abbye."

Now, most of Erin's time is spent tending to Abbye's needs. Family members helped modify a crib and changing table so Erin can roll her wheelchair up to the baby and reach her without lifting. One of her biggest hurdles was safely securing Abbye in a car seat. "I figured out a way to sit on the car console to snap the baby seat in place," Erin explains. "Therapy taught me there's a way to do everything."

BACK TO SCHOOL, BACK ON STAGE AND BACK IN LIFE

"I could not live without other human beings literally helping me stay alive. It's just a reality I have to face," Zack Weinstein says bluntly. It's a tough reality for this 22-year-old college student who's always had a passion for living life to the fullest.

In 2005, Zack accidentally fell headfirst into shallow water and sustained a C-6 complete spinal cord injury that paralyzed him



Photo by Richard Howard

ABOVE: Zack Weinstein, a former spinal cord injury patient from Boston, Mass., rehearses weekly with the Skidmore College Dynamics, an a cappella vocal group. The group recently performed at a reception in Boston to honor Shepherd Center founders, who received a national public service award.



"I'm still the same person inside that I was before being hurt, and I'm determined to pursue the things I've always loved doing." —Zack Weinstein

below his chest. "I refuse to let my life be defined by my injury," Zack says. "I'm still the same person inside that I was before being hurt, and I'm determined to pursue the things I've always loved doing."

Based on a recommendation from a nurse who helped treat Zack just after his injury, Zack came to Shepherd Center for three months of therapy. Initially, he only achieved slight movement in his shoulders and biceps and required sip-and-puff controls to operate his wheelchair. He was so determined to improve, he pushed his therapists to push him harder. "Within weeks, I began moving my wrists, which meant I could feed myself and use a hand-controlled joystick to move my wheelchair," Zack says. "It was huge progress because it meant I had more control."

After inpatient treatment, Zack went home to Massachusetts, where he participated in the First Five Project, a high-intensity exercise program led by Susan Sheehy, an exercise physiologist in Quincy and former Shepherd Center admissions liaison. He also returned to Shepherd in the summers of 2006 and 2007 for Beyond Therapy training.

LEFT: After inpatient treatment at Shepherd Center, Zack Weinstein went home to Massachusetts, where he participated in the First Five Project, a high-intensity exercise program in 2006 led by Susan Sheehy, a Ph.D.-level nurse in Quincy and a former Shepherd Center admissions liaison.

After taking a year off from school, Zack re-enrolled as a sophomore at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., in August 2006. "The school did everything possible to meet my needs," Zack says. "They augmented an accessible dorm room with an automatic sink and towel dispenser, plus a special shower that accommodates my wheelchair. They also reserved an adjoining room for a personal care attendant."

Working toward a degree in theater arts, Zack now balances a full load of classes with regular performances in college plays. He also rehearses weekly with the Skidmore Dynamics, an *a cappella* vocal group that performs on campus and off.

One of Zack's most compelling productions to date is "Back in Life," a video in which Zack recounts the story of his recovery. He hopes his message will inspire other quadriplegic patients to never give up.

"I've lost a lot. The essence of who I am stays strong. Who I am is still very much alive and functional," Zack explains in the film, which is available on his Web site at www.zackweinstein.org. "Take the time to understand the essence of who you are. It will give you the ability to tackle obstacles with confidence and determination."

HEALING FOR LIFE

Dr. Christopher Downs, a cardiologist from Johnson City, Tenn., remembers facing the almost-impossible challenge of breathing on his own again when he first began therapy at Shepherd Center. He had been on a ventilator for three months following an almost-fatal car accident near his home in 2004. "I knew what a serious situation I was in," he says. "And I learned firsthand that when a patient pushes a button for help, they expect it immediately."

Chris sustained a spinal cord injury at the T-4 level, plus severe nerve damage, and was unable to move his body below his chest. The team of physician colleagues who first treated him at Johnson City Medical Center believed Shepherd offered the best option for rehabilitation. During his three-month treatment, Chris realized how fortunate he was to have use of his upper body. "My hands and arms are vital to my work as a physician," he says. "So I was extremely



Photo Courtesy of Larry Smith, ETSU Photo Lab

ABOVE: Former Shepherd Center patient and cardiologist Dr. Chris Downs is director of the cardiovascular fellowship program at East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine in Johnson City, Tenn. He performs procedures such as angioplasties, stress tests and nuclear imaging from his wheelchair.

motivated to work hard and build back as much strength and movement as possible.”

After his return home to Johnson City and continued outpatient therapy, Chris became director of the cardiovascular fellowship program at East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine in 2006. “I decided not to return to private practice because of the long hours and physical demands required,” he explains. “Although I can't do everything I did before my accident, I'm grateful for the opportunity to teach, plus I can perform procedures like angioplasties, stress tests and nuclear imaging from my wheelchair.”

Now 45, Chris finds his greatest fulfillment in his family. He had begun dating his wife, Michelle, four years before his accident, and she remained at his side throughout his recovery. Their inspirational love story and 2005 marriage became the subject of a special Valentine's Day segment on the “Oprah” show.

“We knew the awful pain of almost losing each other and the challenges of staying together,” Chris says. “The struggles we went through only deepened our relationship.”

And now there's baby Lincoln, who was born on Jan. 26, 2007. Like most hands-on dads, Chris helps with feedings, diaper changes and bedtime routines. And Lincoln responds to the sound of his father's wheelchair coming in the door, just as other children recognize their dad's footsteps.

The Downs recently returned from a 10-day trip to Ireland, where a special guide ensured all accommodations and sightseeing excursions were accessible. Chris has always loved traveling, and he and Michelle want to give Lincoln the chance to see the world, too.

“The focus of my life now is taking care of Michelle and Lincoln,” Chris says. “I'm so fortunate to be able to work, be productive and help provide for my family. I want to give my wife and son a great life and will do everything it takes to make that happen.”



Photo Courtesy of Dr. Chris Downs

ABOVE: Dr. Chris Downs and his wife Michelle shared their inspirational love story in a special Valentine's Day segment on the “Oprah” show.

"I've learned to never let anyone tell me I can't do something. When I was in therapy, I made the decision to try my hardest, so I give 100 percent to everything I do."
—Kelsey Tainsh

A "CAN-DO" ATTITUDE CAN DO WONDERS

Diagnosed with a brain tumor when she was 5 years old, Kelsey Tainsh underwent surgery to remove the mass, but when it returned 10 years later, she required a second operation. During the procedure, Kelsey suffered a debilitating stroke that caused complete paralysis on the right side of her body, from her face to her feet.

Kelsey's parents frantically searched for the best rehabilitation program for their daughter. "We discovered Shepherd Center offered a level of therapy you can't find anywhere else," says Kelsey's father, Dr. Robert Tainsh. "Shepherd provided a customized treatment program based on Kelsey's needs as a patient and our needs as a family."

After two weeks as an inpatient at Shepherd, Kelsey underwent the majority of her therapy through Pathways, the Center's outpatient brain injury rehabilitation program. Kelsey's therapy team devised a flexible treatment schedule that allowed time for the Tainsh family to travel home to Winter Park, Fla., several days each week. Kelsey also participated in Shepherd's Beyond Therapy program this past summer and fall.

"Going to therapy was the best part of every day," says Kelsey, now 16. "My therapists were so passionate about their work. They motivated me to want to do more."

Kelsey was no stranger to difficult physical training. Before her stroke, Kelsey ranked second in the nation and third in the world in girls' wakeboarding, and she was a state-champion rower. She also had been an avid snowboarder, surfer, and tennis and volleyball player.

Less than five months after her stroke, Kelsey could walk unassisted, and today she can bench press 250 pounds, do 30 push-ups in one minute, play tennis and swim. She's returned to rowing as team photographer, found time for modeling, and even played small parts in two films and several television shows, including "Desperate Housewives."

Kelsey keeps up with schoolwork by taking online courses through the Florida Virtual School Program and attending Winter Park High School part time. Now in the 12th grade, she maintains high grades and will graduate on time with her class, which includes her two triplet sisters.

Last August, Kelsey became one of only 10 students nationally to receive the 2007 Discover Card Tribute Award, which included a \$25,000 scholarship. The program honored Kelsey for her work with Pet-a-Pup, a special pet therapy program she started for children in area hospitals, as well as the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Winter Park Youth Advisory Board.

"Having a stroke has had many positive effects on my life," Kelsey reflects. "I have learned to overcome obstacles and I know I can overcome any problems or adversity that comes my way."

"I've learned to never let anyone tell me I can't do something," Kelsey says. "When I was in therapy, I made the decision to try my hardest, so I give 100 percent to everything I do."



ABOVE: Kelsey Tainsh of Winter Park, Fla., participated in Shepherd Center's Beyond Therapy program in the summer and fall of 2007. Now, she can bench press 250 pounds, do 30 push-ups in one minute, play tennis and swim.

Photo by Gary Meek