

Treatment • Research

# Shepherd

Center Spinal Column®

## Finding New Frontiers

A New Era for Innovation at Shepherd

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**About the Cover**

Nick Evans, Ph.D., places motion capture sensors on Eden Schroeder in the Human Performance Lab.  
Photo by Bitá Honarvar

Letter from Jamie Shepherd



Dear Readers,

At Shepherd Center, we pride ourselves on being on the cutting edge. Researchers and clinicians use pioneering treatments and technology to give patients and community members the greatest quality of life and independence. But research at Shepherd is nothing new.

Seven years after the hospital's founding, Shepherd was designated a Spinal Cord Injury Model System. This designation connected the hospital to an elite network of spinal cord injury research centers while providing grant funding for its own research initiatives. Three years later, Shepherd established its own in-house research department, now known as the Virginia C. Crawford Research Institute. In 2022, Shepherd Center was designated a Traumatic Brain Injury Model System. And this spring, our research programs moved to a new home in the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation.

In this issue of Spinal Column, we explore new frontiers in research and celebrate the expansion of our main campus, highlighting how these initiatives improve patient lives.

On page 8, you'll get an inside look at the Hulse Spinal Cord Injury Lab. Research participants Hannah Johnston and Robbyn Washington reflect on their experiences in the lab, while lab director Edelle Field-Fote, PT, Ph.D., FAPTA, explains how transcutaneous spinal stimulation, a top focus of the lab, can enhance therapy outcomes.

On page 16, you can explore the 30,000-square-foot James M. Cox Innovation Institute. The institute houses the Best Health Suite, Human Performance Lab, and Travis Roy Ability Bar — giving patients access to state-of-the-art technology, treatments, and therapies to optimize their health and get them back to what they love most.

On page 20, you'll meet Jacob Kennedy, a former patient with a spinal cord injury and amputation. After months of rehabilitation, he achieved one of his biggest goals — making it to his sister's high school graduation nearly 5,000 miles away.

Here's to exploring new frontiers.

*Jamie Shepherd*

Jamie Shepherd, MBA, MHA, FACHE  
President and Chief Executive Officer of Shepherd Center

Summer 2025 | Shepherd Center

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Amber Crucillo, RN, a nurse in the Comprehensive Rehabilitation Unit, prepares medicine for a patient.



See [news.shepherd.org](https://news.shepherd.org)  
for additional online content.

**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 scan the QR code.





Artist Peter Ferrari and art consultant Julie Wynne Jones worked together to bring the mural to life.

## New Courtyard Mural Showcases Shepherd's Mission

After months of planning and a three-week installation, Shepherd's newest mural is complete, bringing The Home Depot Foundation Courtyard to life. It measures 15 feet tall by 109 feet wide and features the Shepherd family, former Shepherd Center patients, a facility dog, and other imagery from the hospital. With its vibrant pinks, oranges, and teals, it gives the courtyard an uplifting atmosphere.

Artist Peter Ferrari hopes the mural will uplift patients and families at

Shepherd and help them find inspiration in those who came before them. "I felt a responsibility to create something that says, 'Hey, you're going to be OK. You're in the right place,'" Peter says. "I want the people who are here to feel a little bit of inspiration, a little bit of optimism. After an injury, life doesn't end. There's still so much you can do."

To learn more about the mural and its design, [visit news.shepherd.org](https://news.shepherd.org).

## SHARE Military Initiative Receives Grant from Wounded Warrior Project

"I came to Shepherd with the hope that I would get better," says Carlos Ordóñez, an Army veteran. "The SHARE program was my last lifeline. They helped me, they helped my family, and we are all smiling again."

Carlos is one of over 800 active-duty service members and veterans who have graduated from the SHARE Military Initiative, a comprehensive rehabilitation program for veterans, service members, and first responders with traumatic brain injuries and mental health concerns. Now, with help from Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP), SHARE will be able to help even more people.

WWP recently announced a grant to support post-9/11 veterans and active service members completing rehabilitation through SHARE. WWP is the nation's leading veteran services organization, focused on the total well-being of post-9/11 wounded, ill, or injured veterans. Through innovative programs and strategic partnerships, WWP ensures that warriors have access to life-changing resources and support — harnessing the expertise of best-in-class organizations like Shepherd Center to meet specialized needs. WWP has partnered with SHARE for over 12 years, providing financial support and sharing resources. Through the support of organizations like WWP and individual donors, rehabilitation through SHARE is provided at no cost to clients like Carlos, who you can read more about on page 22.



(From left) Lauren Thomas, Alexes Venuti, Jamie Shepherd, and Wendy Bryan pose for a photo at the annual employee party.

### Employees on a Mission

## Staff Members Recognized with Best Employee Attitude Award

Shepherd Center has no shortage of wonderful staff members. And every year, staff members nominate colleagues for the Best Employee Attitude Award which recognizes those who have a consistently positive attitude and show respect for patients, families, and colleagues. The award, made possible by the generosity of Fred Alias, recognized 25 finalists this year. Access case manager Wendy Bryan, neuropsychologist Lauren Thomas, and speech-language pathologist Alexes Venuti were awarded the top prizes during the annual employee party at Truist Park. Congratulations to the awardees and nominees!

### Expanding for the Mission

Following the completion of the Arthur M. Blank Family Residences and the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation, Shepherd Center is continuing its path to increase patient access and enhance the patient, family, and staff experience with the renovation and expansion of services in the main hospital. The renovations began in May and will be completed in early 2027.

## Renovations Underway at Main Hospital will result in...

35

New Acquired Brain Injury Patient Beds

105,000 Square Feet Renovated

42

New MS Institute Treatment Rooms

# More Than a Race

Shepherd Center's involvement with the AJC Peachtree Road Race has a lasting impact on athletes, spectators, and the sport.

By Damjana Alverson

Every July 4, Shepherd patients, families, and staff wake up early to encourage athletes in the Atlanta

thoroughfares, attracts 60,000 participants and boasts a rich history and impact on the sport. Since 1984, Shepherd Center has sponsored the

(from left) ► Shepherd Center staff members, patients, and families line up along the sidewalks to cheer on the racers. ► Shepherd Center co-founder David Apple, M.D., chats with wheelchair racers after the race in 1987.



Journal-Constitution Peachtree Road Race. Patients display hand-made posters to support the athletes as they run and wheel up Cardiac Hill, the stretch of uphill road that passes by Shepherd Center. Staff members wear branded t-shirts and throw out sweat wristbands. For Becky Washburn, MS, the wellness manager for Shepherd Center's Beyond Therapy® and ProMotion Fitness Center, passing by Shepherd is a highlight of the race.

"I'm in the pace car, and when I go by Shepherd and see everybody there, I always get teary-eyed. The support is amazing," says Washburn, who serves as coordinator for the wheelchair division of the race.

The Peachtree Road Race, a 10K winding down one of Atlanta's main

race's Wheelchair Division, partnering with the Atlanta Track Club to promote excellence, equity, and inclusion in racing.

## //// The Starting Line

Shepherd Center has a long-standing history of empowering people with disabilities through recreation therapy. Shepherd's Recreation Therapy Program began when David Apple, M.D., the hospital's first medical director, felt the program was so necessary that he paid the salary for Shepherd's first recreation therapist, Barb Trader, out of his own pocket.

"When I started my career at Shepherd in 1978, the disability movement had really started to gain steam," says Barb Trader, a lifelong disability rights advocate who worked

at Shepherd Center as director of recreation therapy for 15 years. "You had to be willing to invent and create a vision for how things could be, whether that was in recreation therapy or in disability rights."

And invent she did. Trader, now retired after a 40+-year career, championed the development of a robust adaptive sports program at the hospital, which has grown to become the Alias Family Sports Teams — 10 teams ranging from track to rugby. She also served as the first coordinator of the AJC Peachtree Road Race Wheelchair Division and helped shape Shepherd's involvement in the race.

The wheelchair division grew quickly. In the first year, the race had four participants. By Trader's eighth year



(From top) Wheelchair racers take off from the starting line. The Peachtree is the world's largest 10K, boasting one of the largest and most competitive wheelchair races in the world. ► Susannah Scaroni crosses the finish line in the 2024 Peachtree Road Race. She won the women's division in 2018, 2022, 2023, and 2024. ► Patients and staff hand out different color sweat wristbands to the racers every year. ► Hospital co-founders James Shepherd and David Apple, M.D., chat after the Peachtree Road Race.



organizing the race, it had 120 athletes from around the world. And the number of participants wasn't the only thing setting the Peachtree apart, she says.

"When Shepherd Center began sponsoring the wheelchair division in 1984, it changed everything," Trader says. "With its connections, Shepherd could help locate sponsors and add prize money for the winners. The Peachtree set the stage for professionalizing wheelchair road racing with the way it seriously considered prize money."

Trader left Shepherd in 1993 to work on the Atlanta Paralympic Organizing Committee for the 1996 Paralympic Games, an event she says she's not sure would have taken place in Atlanta without the impact of Shepherd's involvement in the Peachtree Road Race.

## //// Continuing a Legacy of Inclusion and Hope

Washburn says the race's legacy and the possibilities it shows to Shepherd patients make it unique.

"The history and tradition make this race so special. It's a chance for Shepherd to show our patients what is possible as they cheer on the athletes. It's like an aha moment," she says.

Susannah Scaroni knows how impactful representation in sports is. The American Paralympic athlete and four-time AJC Peachtree Road Race Wheelchair Division winner began attending the Peachtree when she was 10.

"It hugely influenced me growing up," she reflects. "The older athletes showed us what a future could be as a professional athlete and an adult with a disability. They were high-functioning, fun, and independent."

Now, Scaroni carries on that sportsmanship by supporting the next generation of athletes.

"My favorite tradition of the Peachtree is going to brunch at Shepherd after the race and mingling with patients. That's the beauty of the sport — showing others what's possible."

Through the years, other races across the country have followed the



Peachtree's lead by including wheelchair divisions and thinking about equity in the prize purses for all athletes.

"Treating our wheelchair athletes as equal partners to the footrace has raised awareness and shown that whether you have a disability or not, there should be inclusion," Washburn says. "We continue to try to grow the sport of racing and people attending. Peachtree is near and dear to my heart. It level sets what races should look like."



Exercise physiologist Corey Gainey says one of his favorite parts of working in Beyond Therapy is the camaraderie between physiologists, therapists, and clients. ► (bottom) Corey Gainey and Jonny Rea work with Beyond Therapy client Joe Watkins.

# Going Beyond

Exercise Physiologist **Corey Gainey** Shares an Insider's Look at Beyond Therapy

Interview by Erin Kenney

## YEARS AT SHEPHERD: 12

### EDUCATION

- BS Exercise Science/ Kinesiology, Georgia Southern University

### FUN FACTS

- Corey has a Great Dane named Winston.
- He is working on a pilot study implementing Beyond Therapy programming for individuals with cerebral palsy.
- In another life, he'd like to source coffee beans for his career.

**Beyond Therapy® is a cornerstone at Shepherd Center. A one-of-a-kind and truly innovative program, it was one of the first to apply neuroplasticity research to patient care. Building on traditional therapy, which often focuses on compensation strategies, Beyond Therapy aims to reactivate dormant neural connections and help clients train to meet their goals.**

**But if you ask exercise physiologist Corey Gainey what makes Beyond Therapy special, he won't mention the program's origin story, its clinical research ties, or data points, at least not at first. Instead, he'll say the magic of Beyond Therapy lies in the camaraderie between exercise physiologists, physical therapists, and clients.**

### How does Beyond Therapy differ from other programs at Shepherd Center?

For many of our clients, Beyond Therapy gives them a sense of normalcy. Many of our clients are back to living at home post-injury and bring those experiences into therapy.

We had one gentleman who wanted to get back to doing things around the house. He was used to taking care of these duties, but he also found peace when he was in his yard working on stuff. One weekend, he decided that after everything he'd been doing in Beyond Therapy, he could cut grass. But then he dipped into a ditch and fell off the lawnmower. It could've been a situation that went bad, but it didn't. And he came back to Beyond Therapy on Monday and told us about it. He said, "The great thing is I know where I'm lacking balance now," and laughed about it. He took it as an opportunity versus a failure. And it was great that he had the comfort level with us to share that story.

### What is it like working with the other physiologists and physical therapists on your team?

Our physical therapists give us great information. They've worked with multiple populations, so they're very seasoned. That allows us [exercise physiologists] to combine their clinical mindsets with our exercise and fitness mindsets.

We [physiologists] were taught the same things from a principled standpoint, but we've taken that knowledge and applied it differently. I'll tell clients every day, "I'm not the smartest person down here by far, but if you need something explained to you like it's coming from a textbook, we have a couple of guys who are super cerebral, and I'll send you to them." Some clients won't receive things well from me, but at the same time, somebody else may not receive things well from the more cerebral guys. The great thing is we have all these different types of personalities, but we have the same outcomes in mind.

### How does Beyond Therapy differ from people using the ProMotion Fitness Center or a neighborhood gym?

The keyword is neuroplasticity [the nervous system's ability to change its activity by reorganizing its connections after injuries]. Our entire program is built on studies and principles of neuroplasticity — that is the basis of everything we do. We use principles from research studies in each of our sessions to help our clients reach their goals.

Beyond Therapy is also a place of comfort for our clients. Some clients may transition to a neighborhood gym, but a lot of folks will still drive 30 or 45 minutes to be here, because at the end of the day, they know they can come to us with

questions. Plus, if any kind of medical incident or emergency were to happen, we're apt to handle those situations.

### How do you measure progress or success in your clients, especially when they may be dealing with lifelong conditions?

Whenever somebody comes in, we go through initial testing with them that gives us a baseline from a quantitative standpoint. But you can tell somebody, "Hey, you've improved on these measures," but they still may say, "Well, I still can't walk, or I still can't do XYZ." Many clients want results to translate into real life, and to feel confident returning to work or other roles they were in before their injury. That's a better kind of outcome than any quantitative measures we reach — giving people the confidence to get back out there and do it.

### What's a moment that made you stop and think, "This is why I do this work?"

I was working with a client who was with us for about six months, and he didn't have a great prognosis. One day, we were working on standing and balance. He'd been afraid he was going to fall, but then we got to see this playful side of him. I was holding his gait belt, and all of a sudden, I felt this hand slapping on top of my head. I looked up and he was like, "I'm touching your head!" and I just laughed, because it was like, "You're worried about falling, but when it comes to touching my head, you're willing to risk it for that."

From then on, he made it his mission to touch my head whenever he could. For the most part, that would be something I hate, but it was fun to have that back and forth with him. I'd avoid it at all costs and make it a challenge for him, like, "If you can stand and walk toward me and touch my head, then you're awesome."

When he left us, he wasn't walking without assistance yet. But he was in a good place, and he told us that we instilled hope in him to continue working, and his dad said the same. Then about a year after he left, some guy came in the gym and I was like "Who is that?" and then he yells, "I'm gonna come touch your head!" and he walked over and I gave him the biggest hug — and of course, he touched my head.

*Responses have been edited for length and clarity. \**



# Rehabilitation Rewired

In the Hulse Spinal Cord Injury Lab,  
Electrical Stimulation Is Making Waves

By Erin Kenney

(from left) Anastasia Zarkou, PT, MS, Ph.D., Robbyn Washington, Jennifer Iddings, Ph.D., and Hannah Johnston have formed strong bonds through spinal cord injury research in the Hulse Lab.



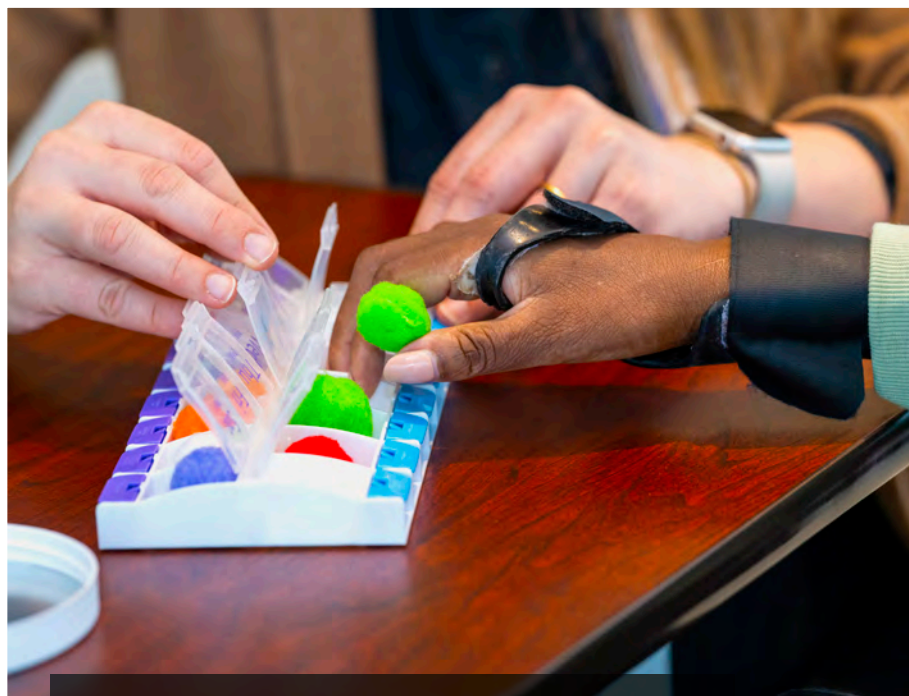


## Robbyn Washington sustained a C4-level spinal cord injury (SCI) during a fall in 2022.

After surgery at Memorial Health University Medical Center in Savannah, Georgia, doctors thought her injury was complete, meaning she wouldn't regain function below her injury. After two months of inpatient therapy at Shepherd, she had no movement.

"When they started talking about discharge, I got really frantic, like, 'What do I do now? I'm not moving,'" she remembers. "It was kind of a frantic time, but we tried to absorb everything they told us and taught us."

Before discharge from Shepherd, she began to feel sensation in her lower back, prompting doctors to change her diagnosis from complete to incomplete SCI and opening a new world of possibilities for her recovery.



(above) Robbyn Washington works with Anastasia Zarkou on a therapy activity. Physical and occupational therapy are an integral part of any electrical stimulation treatment. (opposite page) ▶ Edelle Field-Fote is the principal investigator for the Hulse Spinal Cord Injury Research Lab.

Once she was back home, she and her husband continued her physical therapy program while they worked through delays in finding a home care agency. They referred to handouts and flyers her therapists gave her before she left Shepherd. Over time, they started noticing progress.

Robbyn had returned to Shepherd for the Spinal Cord Injury Day Program when she heard about a research opportunity in the Hulse Spinal Cord Injury Research Lab. The study aimed to reduce muscle spasticity through transcutaneous spinal stimulation (TSS). Even though the study wasn't aimed at improving motor function, after participating, Robbyn noticed changes in her ability to move.

She heard about a study led by Shepherd's SCI Research team, where TSS was used over the neck area to boost the effects of training with the goal of improving hand function. She brought a stimulator she'd been using at home to the SCI research team, where lab director Edelle Field-Fote, PT, Ph.D., FAPTA, FASIA, and the other research scientists adjusted the settings so the device could be used for TSS. Now, she uses the stimulator at home as part of her routine physical therapy practice.

"She's really been a champion of translating the work that we're doing, not only from the lab to her home, but also from the spasticity study that she participated in to her home program for motor function," Dr. Field-Fote says.

Robbyn says TSS has been a game-changer. It's helped her build strength in several muscle groups, and it's especially exciting because even her therapists who don't know she's using TSS are seeing the changes.

“ [Sometimes my therapists] will go, 'Hey, we're noticing a little more strength in this arm, what's going on?' and we laugh. It's great because they're noticing the effects of the TSS and the exercise that goes along with it. ”

— Robbyn Washington

"[Sometimes my therapists] will go, 'Hey, we're noticing a little more strength in this arm, what's going on?' and we laugh," she says. "It's great because they're noticing the effects of the TSS and the exercise that goes along with it."

Electrical stimulation is nothing new, but the Hulse Lab has pioneered its application for TSS. The SCI research team is continuously finding new ways to use it to help people with spinal cord injuries, from reducing spasticity to improving motor function in the hands, to magnifying the effects of locomotor training for improved walking function.

### Turning on the Stove: TSS & Neuromodulation

Dr. Field-Fote is an expert in spinal cord injuries. Her career weaves throughout all kinds of research in that field — from her Ph.D. thesis on turtles with complete SCIs to her work at the Miami Project to Cure Paralysis, a world-renowned research center. At the Miami Project, she worked alongside both basic and applied scientists — basic meaning foundational scientific

research, like doing experiments with animal models or cells in a dish. She frequently reviews grant proposals and papers on the basic science of SCIs, and she's received numerous distinctions for her work in the field.

In short, she knows a lot about spinal cord injuries. And she says that right now, despite all the attention the media gives to high-tech approaches, rehabilitation is key to helping people with SCIs regain function after injury.

"The research evidence shows that right now rehabilitation is the best approach we have for improving function in people with spinal cord injury," Dr. Field-Fote says. "And when I say rehabilitation, I mean practice and training. The focus of my lab has acknowledged that physical and occupational therapy are the best ways to promote neuroplasticity."

That's why, as director of the Hulse Lab, Dr. Field-Fote has focused research efforts on how tools like TSS and other forms of neuromodulation can improve physical and occupational therapy outcomes. By applying stimulation to the spinal cord or the brain, the SCI researchers in the lab make the nervous system more receptive to therapy.

"These tools change the nervous system, but you still have to tell the nervous system what you want it to change," Dr. Field-Fote says. "Think of a stove that has four burners. If you turn the stove on, it will heat up, but there's no usefulness to it until you put a pot on the stove with the soup. Stimulation provides the system with energy, but it's the training that tells the nervous system what to do with that energy."

In addition to improving hand and walking function when combined with training, TSS can also help reduce spasticity — another focus for the Hulse Lab. The lab's scientists also determine best practices, such as





“

You don't look the same as you used to, or you don't feel the same, and your body's definitely not the same, but there's no judgment. You're just loved and appreciated and respected at the same time. I can't imagine being anywhere else and being able to receive the same treatment.

— Hannah Johnston, research participant

”

where to place the electrodes and whether to use the stimulation in bursts or as a continuous pulse.

“If you think about a spinal cord that is damaged, the signals are still coming down from the brain, but information is not making it out to the muscles,” Dr. Field-Fote says. “It's like a hose that has holes in it, and you might not be able to do anything about the holes in the hose, but if you turn up the spigot, more of it's going to get to the end.”

### ‘Ready to Find a Breakthrough’

Of course, none of the lab's research would be possible without help from research participants. For research scientists Anastasia Zarkou, PT, MS, Ph.D., and Jennifer Iddings, Ph.D., their groundbreaking work in noninvasive brain stimulation to improve hand function in people with SCIs finds its true purpose in patient interactions.

“We love working with participants. It's probably our favorite part of the job,” Dr. Iddings says. “Research seems to attract a very specific type of person who wants to benefit the spinal cord injury community in some way. They'll say, ‘It

doesn't matter if it helps me, as long as we get knowledge out of it.’”

Research participant Hannah Johnston is one example of someone embracing this philosophy. Hannah's experience with research is intertwined with her recovery journey — she started a clinical drug trial while in the hospital following an accident with an 18-wheeler. She sustained a C3-C4 level SCI and was taken to the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Once her condition stabilized, she transferred to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation, where she continued the drug trial and later participated in other studies.

“I've been the research girl for quite some time — for the entire length of my spinal cord injury, I've been participating in research of some sort,” she says.

Hannah has many reasons for participating in research. For starters, she says Shepherd Center is her home away from home. After her inpatient therapy, she went straight into the Spinal Cord Injury Day Program and later returned for another round of Day Program and Beyond Therapy.



Anastasia Zarkou, PT, MS, Ph.D. guides Hannah Johnston through a hand training activity, while Jennifer Iddings, Ph.D. monitors brain stimulation being applied non-invasively via electrodes embedded in a cap.



"You don't look the same as you used to, or you don't feel the same, and your body's definitely not the same, but there's no judgment," she says. "You're just loved and appreciated and respected at the same time. I can't imagine being anywhere else and being able to receive the same treatment."

While continuing outpatient therapy, Hannah got involved with the Hulse Lab's spasticity study, funded by a research grant from the National Institutes of Health, and also with a motor skill training study funded by the SCI Model Systems grant. She says working with research staff members like Drs. Zarkou and Iddings makes participating in research all the better.

"They're just so eager. You know, a lot of people go to work and do their job and do the bare minimum," she says. "But you don't get that here, and you definitely don't get that with research. They're happy to be here, but they're also ready to find something to help somebody — to find a new breakthrough."

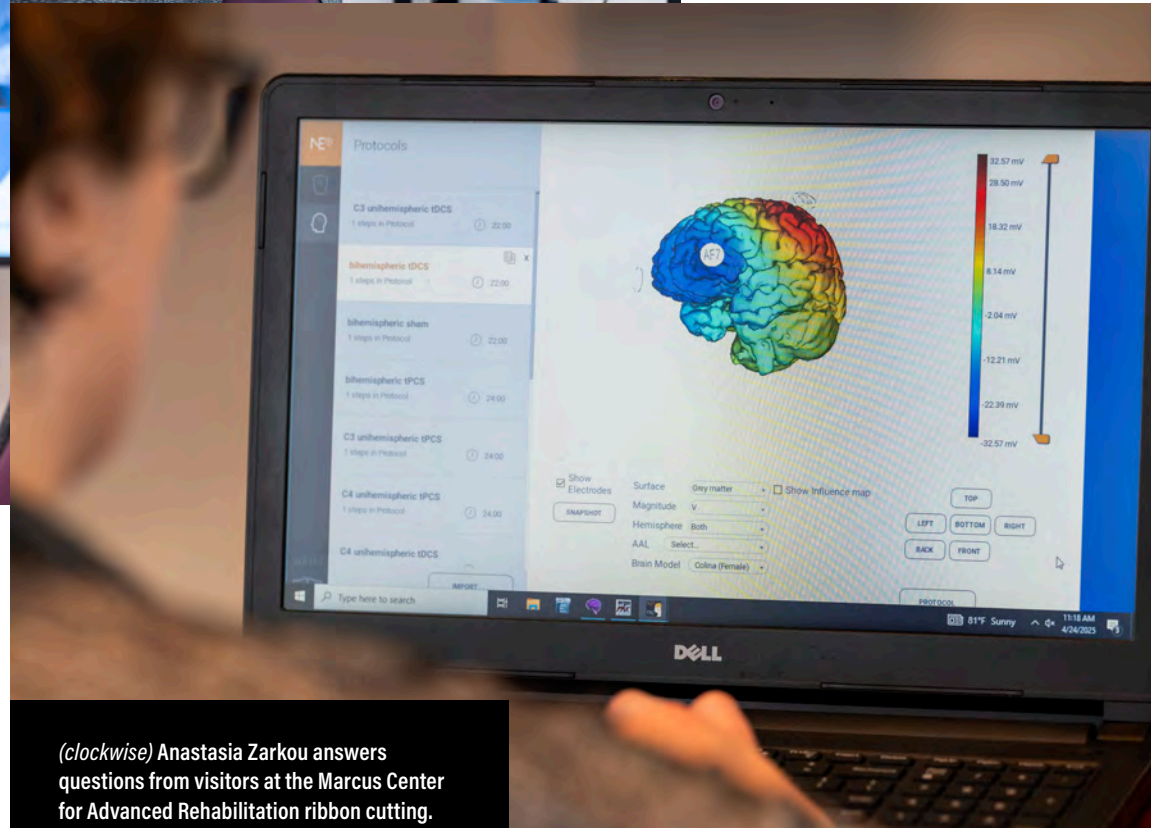
Hannah did experience some breakthroughs because of the research. For the spasticity study, she wore sensors on her body that connected to a computer monitor, showing her which

muscles she was activating. She says she could see where she was overcompensating and where she wasn't fully activating certain muscle groups. As a result, she learned how to better isolate certain muscles.

Hannah also says she continues to visit with Drs. Iddings and Zarkou when she's at the hospital, jokingly adding that she and Dr. Zarkou "are like best friends." It's not uncommon for research participants to feel this way — Drs. Iddings and Zarkou make it a point to build relationships with patients who might be interested in research starting when they're inpatients.

"We never want someone to be interested in research and verbalize this to someone and not meet one of us," Dr. Zarkou says. "Even if they aren't eligible for one of our research projects, we are more than happy to guide them through resources and other opportunities that are out there for them."

"[They're] more than a participant to us. We are there for them," Dr. Zarkou says. "We want them to feel comfortable reaching out to us because that's what establishes this relationship."



(clockwise) Anastasia Zarkou answers questions from visitors at the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation ribbon cutting. ► Jennifer Iddings answers questions at the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation Ribbon Cutting. ► Iddings reviews the electric field generated by noninvasive brain stimulation.

### Building a Better Study

Scientists in the Hulse Lab rely on participants to complete their studies, and they also need participants' feedback to create better clinical trials. Dr. Zarkou says she often returns to participants after a study to learn what went well and what could've gone better. She says a participant's perspective is equally important when working on proposals for new studies. Some grant funding even requires including participant perspectives in proposals, something scientists in the Hulse Lab are proponents of.

“

[They're] more than a participant to us. We are there for them. We want them to feel comfortable reaching out to us because that's what establishes this relationship.

— Dr. Anastasia Zarkou

”

"We might have the best idea in the world, right?" Dr. Zarkou says. "But I'm not the person who lives with spinal cord injury, so [we have] our participants come and say, 'Yeah, that seems like a good idea, but what are you going to do about this?'"

For example, participants might flag that a clinical trial requires too many research sessions or that each session is too long. Participants living outside Atlanta may have to fight traffic just to make it in time for a research session — a concern that has eased slightly with the expansion of housing at Shepherd, which can sometimes accommodate an out-of-town participant to stay in the Irene and George Woodruff Family Residence Center, Dr. Iddings says.

The lab prioritizes participants' needs — from making the research process accessible to addressing problems for people living with SCIs.

Although the research team can never promise a beneficial outcome to participants — the purpose of research is to test out new ideas, after all — this is no turnoff for Robbyn and Hannah. They say even if they hadn't personally benefited from the research, they'd do it all over to help someone else down the line.

"I already had my foot in the door with research when I got here, and of course, I was willing and ready to participate," Hannah says. "But some people seem uninterested or hesitant, and I've been trying to encourage people to get involved or ask if there's a good fit for them. It's not going to hurt you in any way; it would only help you, or at least help somebody else in the future."

Robbyn shares this sentiment, adding that she encouraged a friend who had a stroke to look into brain injury research at Shepherd.

"I am definitely an advocate of 'You'll never know until you try,'" she says. "Even if it doesn't help me feel something, someone else could really benefit. They could get more data so they could see where they could help others."

At Shepherd, there are ongoing clinical trials in the Hulse Lab and other research areas throughout the hospital, including brain injury, multiple sclerosis, and accessibility and user research. To learn more about opportunities or how to get involved, you can visit [shepherd.org/research](https://shepherd.org/research).

# Want to be a part of the mission?

By volunteering for research studies, you can be a part of Shepherd's mission to improve lives. Your participation can play a key role in developing innovative treatments and advancing care for those affected by neurological conditions. With focus areas on spinal cord injuries, brain injuries, multiple sclerosis, and accessibility and user experience, there are a variety of clinical trials and other opportunities to help shape the future of neurorehabilitation.

To learn more visit [shepherd.org/research](https://shepherd.org/research).



# Finding New Frontiers

## Celebrating the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation

By Erin Kenney

### Deborah Backus Gives a Behind-the-Scenes Look at the James M. Cox Innovation Institute

The Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation (MCAR) is a snapshot of Shepherd Center in 2025. It's a culmination of 50 years of progress, community engagement, and patient-centered care. But the 11th floor offers even more — a glimpse into Shepherd Center's future.

The space, home to the James M. Cox Innovation Institute, is the new base for Shepherd's state-of-the-art technology, brilliant research teams, creative engineers, and expert seating, driving and access technology specialists. The top floor is already making a big difference in the lives of patients and staff members alike, and it's outfitted for continual growth and breakthroughs in the years to come.

Deborah Backus, PT, Ph.D., FACRM, Shepherd's vice president of research and innovation, played a key part in planning the Innovation Institute. Here, she shares a glimpse into the space.

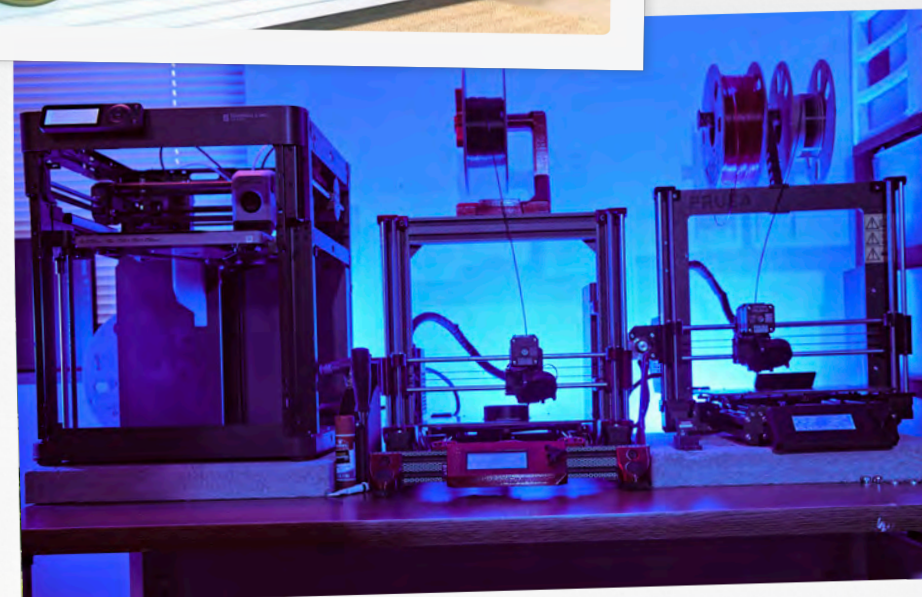


#### Tech Hub

When you exit the elevators on Floor 11, you're greeted by double doors bearing Shepherd's logo. Pass through these doors, and you'll find jaw-dropping

views of the Atlanta skyline, as well as equally impressive displays of assistive technology. Home to the new Travis Roy Ability Bar and adjacent to the Center for Assistive Technologies, the MCAR Tech Hub is the future of patient access to technology, for everything from adaptive gaming to smart home controls. Backus says she hopes the Tech Hub will help people even outside of Shepherd's walls.

"Our mission is to break down barriers — the best care and quality of life. We want to have open houses and workshops so people with disabilities can learn new skills like 3D printing to develop their own solutions. We aim to have people from around the world come see and trial these technologies and solutions and decide what's best for them to use at home."



(clockwise from top) Deborah Backus, PT, Ph.D., FACRM, Shepherd's vice president of research and innovation, played a key part in planning the Innovation Institute.

► The Access Technology Lab offers a variety of assistive tech solutions for people with disabilities. ► Deborah Backus hopes that the Innovation Institute will be able to host workshops so people with disabilities can learn skills like 3D printing. ► The new Wheelchair Seating and Mobility Clinic features a variety of wheelchair seating options and a small terrain course for wheelchair users.

## Human Performance Lab

Down the hall from the Tech Hub, the Human Performance Lab combines state-of-the-art technology with clinician expertise to fully evaluate a patient's motor and cognitive capabilities, as well as their behavioral attributes, to better understand what they need and to fully customize care. Equipped with a ZeroG 3D to provide body-weight support for balance and walking, an instrumented treadmill outfitted with a virtual reality projector screen, and two types of motion-tracking cameras, clinicians can evaluate and track their patients' movement and develop personalized plans based on their needs. Plus, researchers and innovators will use this motion-capture technology to inform research, technology development, and future patient care at Shepherd.

"We are collecting this data to do predictive analytics, and combine this new data with our huge existing database, to be able to understand a person's characteristics, who they are, what their capabilities are, where they're from, and better identify what they need while they're at Shepherd or wherever they are in their recovery journey," Backus says.



She also hopes the data will be helpful when working with insurance companies, providing evidence for the care patients need, and technology developers to create the next generation of solutions for Shepherd patients. Care teams across the hospital will have more data to inform decisions about treatment, discharge, and continued rehabilitation.



## Best Health Suite

A couple of doors down from the performance lab, the Best Health Suite serves both patients at Shepherd and those back home in their communities who may not have access to a facility like Shepherd. The space is both a workout studio and recording studio, allowing exercise physiologists to lead group exercise classes and record them for use as future on-demand programming through burnalong®. The programming is free for Shepherd patients, so no matter where they travel, they have access to guided sessions from Shepherd clinicians. Dr. Backus says the new studio space also gives Shepherd's tele-wellness programs room to grow.

"People with disabilities from a spinal cord injury, brain injury, or multiple sclerosis face barriers to accessing experts for exercise and wellness," Dr. Backus says. "Our Best Health Suite and burnalong® partnership break down these barriers for Shepherd patients and any person with these issues anywhere in the world."

## Research Programs

In addition to supporting new initiatives, the Cox Innovation Institute has brought all of Shepherd's research programs onto one floor, giving researchers the opportunity to easily collaborate with other labs and departments. Dr. Backus says a collaboration room for researchers was a priority when planning the 11th floor. It's already getting heavy use.

"It gets used every single day. It's different than a conference room — it has a lot of whiteboards and comfy seating — and people meet in there and have such energetic conversations. My office is down the hall, and I have to close my door and put on music, because it can get loud," she says with a smile. "It's been great."

**20** motion-sensing cameras in the Human Performance Lab

**30,000** sq. ft.  
Size of James M. Cox Innovation Institute

**10** Exercise class capacity in the Best Health Suite

**6** research teams working on the top floor of MCAR

**"It's been wonderful. It's a whole different kind of interaction, having the whole research team together and being able to brainstorm — it's really going to elevate us."**

— Deborah Backus

(clockwise from top) Ashley Levy uses the Biodex machine, while research scientist Nick Evans, Ph.D., gives her guidance.

► Eden Schroeder wears a combination of motion-tracking sensors and a COSMED K5 mask, which collect data on her oxygen consumption and movements.

► Elijah Watkins (left) and Nick Evans place motion-tracking sensors on Ashley Levy.

# A Hero's Journey

**Jacob Kennedy's story of strength, support, and starting again**

By Chris Walker

Jacob with members of his superhero care team at Shepherd Center. Pictured (back to front, left to right): Lauren Jones, Inpatient RN; Julie Shepherd, Director of Founding Family Relations and Canine Therapy Program Lead; Elana Kennedy (Jacob's mom); Tex, Facility Dog; Jacob; Kelsey Shearman, Academic Coordinator.

**Every hero faces a defining moment in their story. A challenge that reshapes them, a test of their strength, and a journey that reveals who they truly are. For 16-year-old Jacob Kennedy, that moment came in the wake of a life-changing injury in 2022.**

As a talented street artist under the tag "Sieno" (artistically changed from Siento, meaning "I feel"), Jacob was living in Vienna, Austria, a country where street art is celebrated. While creating street art one day, Jacob was electrocuted through an electrical arc, passed out, and fell to the ground. The electrocution resulted in an amputation of his right arm, and the fall severed his spine at the T4 and T5 vertebrae. His journey of recovery wasn't a straight line; there were days filled with progress, and others where frustration made him question whether he'd ever regain the independence he longed for, including a return to his art.

At Shepherd Center, he wasn't just a patient — he was part of a team. His mom, his therapists, his doctors, and even one of Shepherd's beloved facility dogs became his sidekicks in recovery, pushing him forward and believing in him on the hardest days.

"There were nights when I lay awake, wondering if I'd ever get back to the life I knew," Jacob says. "Over time, I started to see that progress wasn't always obvious, but it was always happening. Small victories, like lifting a fork or standing a little longer, reminded me to keep going."

His mom, Elana, saw the power of those small victories, too. "At first, Jacob didn't want to talk to anyone — he wasn't here to make friends," she recalls. "But the team understood him. They pushed him, made him laugh, and earned his trust. There's no way he would be where he is today without the people at Shepherd who showed up for him."

## The superpower of resilience and humor

Through every challenge, Jacob discovered something powerful: his resilience was his greatest superpower, and his humor was his secret weapon.

"I learned to sit with discomfort, to push through pain, and to find reasons to laugh in the toughest of moments," he says. "Laughing with my therapists, playing pranks, watching Game of Thrones with my caregivers, those moments reminded me that joy can still exist, even when life feels heavy."

One of his proudest milestones came when he transferred into his wheelchair independently, something that seemed impossible.

"I was so focused on what I couldn't do that I hadn't stopped to see how far I'd come," he says. "The realization hit me like a wave. That moment wasn't just about moving myself, it was about realizing my own physical, emotional, and mental strength."

For Elana, some of the most meaningful moments came when Jacob began reconnecting with his passions. As part of his therapy, he was encouraged to practice writing his street art tag on the bathroom mirror using his non-dominant hand — a simple yet powerful act of self-expression. Later, during a recreation therapy outing, Jacob added his tag to a local street art site in Atlanta, one of countless opportunities that helped him get back to doing what he loved.



(Clockwise from left) Jacob took part in Project Rollway in 2024, two years after his injury. ▶ Jacob and Cheryl Linden, MA, LPC, MS, OT/L, a professional counselor who works with adolescent patients. ▶ Jacob's street art tag, "Sieno," comes from the Spanish word "Siento," meaning "I feel."



"It may seem incremental, but Jacob getting out into the community and adding his art was huge. That kind of encouragement helped him believe anything was possible," she reflects.

## Achieving the ultimate goal

But his biggest victory? Making it to his sister's high school graduation in Austria, just five months after his injury.

"From day one, that was my goal," he says. "Doctors told my mom to temper my expectations, but I refused to accept that."

"Everyone knew Jacob's goal was to get to Austria," Elana reflects. "We were discharged from Shepherd Center, and that night, Jacob and I were alone on a commercial flight to Vienna. I think I was more nervous than he was, but we did it."

For Jacob, the moment wasn't just about reaching a personal goal, it was a symbol of how far he had come. Now, Jacob's mission continues. He's embracing his future with determination, considering a path in law or psychiatry to advocate for others facing adversity. This has included being in a documentary to highlight the dangers of unmarked high-voltage areas. No matter what comes next, he'll carry the hope he gained from Shepherd.

"Hope used to feel like an abstract idea," he says. "Now it's something I carry with me; an active force I cultivate every day."

With his family by his side, Jacob isn't just beginning again, he's writing a whole new story, one built on strength, purpose, and the unwavering belief that even in the hardest moments, there is always hope. \*

## Shepherd Alums:

# On a Mission

By Sara Baxter and Erin Kenney

### Carlos Ordóñez

Fayetteville, North Carolina

Like many people who come to Shepherd Center's SHARE Military Initiative, Carlos Ordóñez felt he was at the end of his rope. For over a decade, he had been experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a traumatic brain injury (TBI), resulting in chronic depression and anxiety, panic attacks, and chronic migraines. While he sought help through the military, nothing was working.

As things got worse, Carlos began having suicidal ideations. "No one saw the pain I was in," Carlos says. "I was suffering in silence."

Carlos was in the U.S. Army for 18 years in Mechanized Infantry and later in Special Forces. He had a total of 11 deployments and although he has experienced several TBI incidents, the more significant were in Afghanistan in 2007 when he was involved in three different explosions.

When he heard about SHARE from a friend, he decided to try it. After his acceptance in April 2019, he began psychological, speech, physical, occupational, and recreational therapy. Doctors prescribed medications to alleviate his chronic migraines.

By the time he left three months later, he had seen dramatic improvements.

"It was the last time I'd had any suicidal thoughts," he says. "The symptoms of my PTSD decreased, and my migraines improved. I became a better husband and father. And the counseling my family received helped them understand my symptoms."

Carlos medically retired from the Army in October 2019 and focused on his health and eventually a new career. He returned to school and earned a bachelor's degree in intercultural studies from Manna University and now works there teaching Latin American students.

While studying for his master's degree, he began to experience eye strain/fatigue and more frequent migraines, which led to depression. He returned to SHARE in March 2025.

"They are helping me learn the different triggers and how to pace myself before the migraines increase to a debilitating level," Carlos says. "I am also learning new tools to make things easier on my eyes."

Carlos says that because of SHARE, he is happier, more focused, and has fewer PTSD and TBI symptoms. He also has a better relationship with his family.

"I came to Shepherd with the hope that I would get better," he says. "The SHARE program was my last lifeline. They helped me, they helped my family, and we are all smiling again."

### Emma Fritsche

Bluffton, South Carolina

When Emma Fritsche was visiting family in New Jersey last summer, she told her mother to leave her wheelchair in the car. Instead, she used her walker. Months later, back home in Bluffton, South Carolina, she left her walker in the car and opted to use her cane.

These milestones illustrate the strength and determination Emma showed during her recovery from transverse myelitis, an inflammatory disease of the spinal cord that can lead to paralysis and other neurological symptoms.

The day after Thanksgiving, 2023, Emma lost feeling in her left arm. Within 20 minutes, she was paralyzed from the neck down. Her parents rushed her to a hospital in Hilton Head, South Carolina. The next day, she transferred to MUSC Health University Medical Center in Charleston. She was in respiratory failure and was immediately intubated.

After she stabilized, doctors at MUSC encouraged the family to take Emma to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation. She was admitted to Shepherd Center's ICU on Dec. 29, 2023, still using a ventilator to help her breathe and with paralysis on her left side.

Yet when Emma and her family entered Shepherd Center, they were filled with hope.

"From the moment we came through the doors, our lives changed," says Emma's mother, Tracy. "I can't say enough good things about Emma's care team. It was like a family."

Emma's first goal was to get off the ventilator. Her team worked with her to wean her from ventilator support. She participated in physical, occupational, and speech therapy. Function and feeling began to return slowly.

When she had trouble motivating herself, she says the staff stepped in to support her.

"They would give me pep talks," she remembers. "Everyone was rooting for me."

When she left Shepherd Center on April 9, 2024, she could care for herself independently. Her mobility was improving, too, and she transitioned from a power chair to a manual chair.

More than a year later, Emma, 22, needs a cane only when she's walking for long periods. She's back at home and is considering going to college. And she's grateful for Shepherd Center.

"I like to say that MUSC saved my life, and Shepherd changed my life," Emma says. "I learned how to be stronger and to advocate for myself. They made what I was experiencing into something positive."



### Joshua Craft

Oxford, Alabama

"From the outside looking in, nobody can tell that I had a head injury," says Joshua Craft. "But there's a fight I have with myself every day to make sure I'm doing the things I was trained to do."

After sustaining a traumatic brain injury (TBI) 22 years ago, Joshua Craft has worked ceaselessly to manage his symptoms. And he credits Shepherd Center for starting his rehabilitation journey.

When Joshua was 16, he fell out of a truck while working a summer job, fracturing his skull. After stabilizing at a hospital in Birmingham, Alabama, Joshua came to Shepherd Center. His first memory of Shepherd was July 4, 2003, when his therapists took him and other patients to the roof to watch fireworks over the city.

While in the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program, Joshua completed physical, occupational, and speech therapy. After inpatient therapy, he moved on to Pathways. Throughout his time at Shepherd, peer support played a critical role in his recovery and inspired him to help other TBI survivors.

"As I started getting better and improving, I wanted to help," he says. "I wanted to be there for people. And that's what I do now. I love to help people, whether I'm helping somebody whose home got damaged in a storm, or helping a fellow traumatic brain injury survivor."

After his discharge from Shepherd, his mom and aunt, a nurse and teacher, helped him navigate his needs at home. College proved to be a different experience.

"I didn't have anybody to advocate for me," he remembers. "I had to make sure I was getting the accommodations I deserved, which is something I've told other TBI survivors — nobody is going to fight for you in college."

Joshua faced another challenge while in college: a cancer diagnosis. While his prognosis was good, he had to endure several rounds of chemotherapy, which gave him debilitating side effects. He says his TBI rehab prepared him for his battle with cancer.

"Anytime I would get down about it, I'd tell myself, 'This is nothing — you've slayed greater giants than cancer,'" he says.

Joshua beat cancer and graduated from college, returning to his hometown to work for the local government. He still has lingering symptoms from his injury, both physical and mental. But he says he has the tools and mindset to navigate them, thanks partly to Shepherd Center.

"Everything was right for me at the time [of my injury] — the stars lined up. Nobody else in the world could've given me better care or support than the ones that were there. I was very fortunate," he says.



### Sonya Ingram

Lithonia, Georgia

Sonya Ingram does not like needles. But after experiencing migraines and vision problems, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). And after several MS relapses, doctors prescribed a self-injectable medication, so needles became a major part of her life.

In the years after her diagnosis, Sonya tried five pharmaceutical MS treatments — including several injections — but each one included troublesome side effects for her and frequent trips to the doctor's office.

As an Army veteran, Sonya receives care at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Atlanta. Someone at the VA suggested she get involved with the National MS Society, which led her to Shepherd Center's Eula C. and Andrew C. Carlos Multiple Sclerosis Rehabilitation and Wellness Program. The program opened her eyes to a new way of living with MS.

"I was just in complete shock that there was a place out there for people with MS, and there's another way of living besides being on medication and in the hospital all the time," she says. "I get a little chill thinking about that now, because I thought my life was over and it wasn't."

Sonya comes to Shepherd every Monday for MS Wellness sessions with exercise physiologist Sheree Love, where she exercises to improve her strength and balance. When she first started attending the sessions, she used a cane, but as she's gotten stronger, she no longer needs it every day. While medication is often an important part of managing MS, Sonya no longer takes medications to manage her symptoms.

The MS Wellness Program addresses more than just the physical aspects of living with MS. Community outings and holiday parties allow people with MS to connect, which has been Sonya's favorite part of the program. She's also involved in Shades of MS, a group Love started for the Black MS community to provide a safe space for participants to discuss their illness.

"It's worth the hour drive in the morning to go, because I'm with other people who have multiple sclerosis. I'm with people who understand what we're going through," she says.

Community — both through Shepherd Center and Sonya's Christian faith — has helped her navigate more than just her illness. She recently moved into a new house and started a business selling customized tumblers — something she loves, and something she says wouldn't be possible without prayers and support from her community.

"I love learning something new, even at an older age," Sonya says. "I never thought about having a business or doing something like this, but being a part of a community shows you, 'Hey, you can move forward, you can do new things.'"



# Celebrating the Ribbon Cutting

of the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation



(from left) Cindy Martinez, a former patient at Shepherd Center, gave a moving speech about her recovery journey. ► Frank Blake, Alana Shepherd, Fred Marcus, and Jamie Shepherd stood together for the ceremonial ribbon cutting.

## The vision for the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation began with an \$80 million grant from The Marcus Foundation in December 2020.

Now, 11 floors, 385,000 square feet, and one and a half years of construction later, that vision has come to fruition.

On the evening of April 1, Shepherd Center board members, campaign donors, employees, and leadership gathered to commemorate the ribbon cutting of the new Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation (MCAR). This 11-story tower houses Shepherd Center's new James M. Cox Foundation Innovation Institute and an expanded Dean Stroud Spine and Pain Institute while providing significant space for future growth.

Susan Hawkins, co-chair of Pursuing Possible: The Campaign for Shepherd Center and a member of the hospital's Board of Directors, opened the program by highlighting the generous philanthropic support that has led to the campaign's success. Then, Rabbi Peter Berg gave a beautiful invocation, followed by comments from Jamie Shepherd, MBA, MHA, FACHE, Shepherd Center's president and chief executive officer, who recognized the excellent work of the hospital's construction partners and celebrated the

transformative impact that Bernie and Billi Marcus and The Marcus Foundation have had at Shepherd Center.

Cindy Martinez, a former patient at Shepherd Center, then spoke about her rehabilitation journey and the magnificent impact that MCAR will have for future patients and their families. Following Cindy's comments, Frank Blake, Chairman of The Marcus Foundation, spoke about the foundation's enduring belief in Shepherd Center's mission and pride in their continued investment. He was followed by Erik Shaw, D.O., Pain Institute medical director and Deborah Backus, PT, Ph.D., FACRM, vice president of research and innovation, who provided guests with an overview of the tours and demonstrations of the evening.

Shepherd Center co-founder Alana Shepherd then joined Jamie Shepherd, Frank Blake, and Fred Marcus, a son of Bernie Marcus and a member of The Marcus Foundation board, for the ceremonial ribbon cutting. Jamie Shepherd concluded the program by expressing his continued appreciation for all campaign donors on behalf of his family and the entire Shepherd Center team. He invited all guests to tour the building and enjoy conversation with and demonstrations from Shepherd's amazing clinicians and researchers.

Photos by Bitia Honarvar

## A Bridge to the Future



By Erin Kenney

On February 20, Shepherd Center celebrated a major milestone — the dedication of the James H. Shepherd, Jr. Bridge. This new bridge connects Shepherd Center's existing campus to the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation (MCAR), symbolizing the hospital's mission to better serve patients and families.

Named in honor of James' legacy and supported by generous partners like Suzanne Dansby, employees, and physicians, the bridge will allow patients and visitors to move seamlessly from the main hospital to MCAR.

"This bridge is going to allow patients to come from the hospital to see us in the pain center, so that we can continue

to offer them improved pain and spasticity care to help with their ongoing rehabilitation," says Erik Shaw, D.O., Medical Director of Dean Stroud Pain Institute. "It will allow fluid transport from our new building back to the main hospital, without having to cross the driveway in inclement weather. It's going to offer a lot of benefits for our patients."

This project was made possible by the incredible generosity of longtime donor and former trustee Suzanne Dansby, the full support of Shepherd's medical staff, and contributions from dedicated employees through the ShepherdCares employee giving campaign. The bridge has already been used extensively, but it represents more than just a path between buildings — it's a tribute to Shepherd Center's promise of being the bridge between "I can't" and "I can."



(clockwise from top) The James H. Shepherd, Jr. Bridge connects the hospital's main building to the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation. ► Donor Suzanne Dansby, medical director Michael Yocheslon, hospital co-founders David Apple and Alana Shepherd, president and CEO Jamie Shepherd, and the Spinal Cord Injury Program office manager Tuwanyo Willis took part in the ceremonial ribbon cutting. ► Suzanne Dansby spoke following the ribbon cutting and dedication ceremony.



Photos by William Twitty

# A Night of Hope and Celebration

## 2025 Legendary Party Kickoff

Shepherd Center will open a new, state-of-the-art acquired brain injury (ABI) unit in 2026, expanding patient access to world-renowned brain injury rehabilitation. Attendees at this year's Legendary Party Kickoff got an exclusive preview of plans for the new unit within the existing hospital.

On Feb. 20, Shepherd Center supporters, donors, and community leaders gathered for the annual Legendary Party Kickoff, launching a year of celebration under the theme "The Enchantment of Fifty." The event celebrated five decades of hope, healing, and transformation, while looking ahead to the future.

Jamie Shepherd, MBA, MHA, FACHE, president and chief executive officer of Shepherd Center, welcomed guests and introduced this year's Ball Chairs, Shanna and Bill Bradley. The Bradleys shared their passion for Shepherd Center's mission and presented the plans for the new ABI unit, providing guests with a glimpse of the cutting-edge facility that will open doors to greater access to specialized care.

One of the evening's highlights was hearing the Scott family share their journey with Shepherd Center and their involvement in planning the new ABI Unit. Their son, Austin, sustained a traumatic brain injury in May 2023. After rehabilitation at Shepherd, he was able to return to school and hopes to become a child psychiatrist. The family's remarks emphasized the life-changing support provided by the hospital and the importance of patient and family engagement in creating specialized care environments.

Katie Metzger, OTR, MBA, director of Brain Injury Services, spoke about how the program involves patients and families at every stage, ensuring the best possible outcomes and preparing them for life beyond the hospital. She shared that the new 35-bed unit will have a transformative impact on the program, providing exclusively private rooms and a healing environment tailored to both physical and cognitive rehabilitation.

The evening's theme, "The Enchantment of Fifty," reflected Shepherd Center's extraordinary journey and the enduring resilience that defines its community. As guests mingled and enjoyed the festivities, the event served as both a celebration of past

achievements and a rallying call for continued innovation and compassion in the years ahead. Guests left with renewed passion for Shepherd Center's future, taking with them the stories and vision that will set the direction for the next 50 years.

This year's Legendary Party will be on Nov. 1 at Flourish Atlanta. For more information, contact Saylor Petrie at [saylor.petrie@shepherd.org](mailto:saylor.petrie@shepherd.org).

# Shepherd Center Junior Committee 2025 Kickoff

By Saylor Petrie

On March 13, Shepherd Center's Junior Committee (SCJC) kicked off its robust calendar of events for 2025 at Buckhead Art & Company. Guests enjoyed good food, drinks, music, and great company while gearing up for another year of supporting Shepherd Center's Recreation Therapy Program.

The evening's highlight was hearing from Eden Schroeder, who shared her experience living with spinal cord injury. She spoke about Shepherd Center helping her regain independence, including returning to school and rediscovering her love of swimming.

SCJC is a passionate group of young professionals dedicated to helping people with disabilities rebuild their lives with hope and dignity through fundraising, patient support, and community events. This year, they aim to raise over \$50,000 to support Shepherd Center's Recreation Therapy program, which helps patients heal and grow through fun, adaptive activities, and outings. Since the kickoff, the group has raised \$10,200.

The committee plans to host favorite events like the patient Ice

Cream Social and Family Cookout, as well as a new event, the Shepherd Social at Sweetwater Brewing. These gatherings raise money while bringing together patients, families, and volunteers.

With the energy from this kickoff, SCJC is ready to make 2025 another meaningful year for Shepherd Center and the people it serves. \*

Junior Committee co-presidents Virginia Brown (Left) & Lollie Davis (Right) listen to Eden Schroeder's remarks at the organization's annual kickoff event.



## Save the Date

### Upcoming Events

Portraits of Hope  
Gallery Opening  
Thursday, July 17  
Shepherd Center

Shepherd Center Day  
Monday, Aug. 18  
Statewide in Georgia

Junior Committee's  
Shepherd Social  
Saturday, Sept. 6  
SweetWater Brewing  
Company

RPM 9/11 5K  
Saturday, Sept. 13  
Chastain Park

Shepherd Center Cup  
Monday, Sept. 15  
Cherokee Country Club

Conlan Cup  
Monday, Sept. 29  
The Golf Club of Georgia

Shepherd's Men  
Clay Shoot  
Friday, Oct. 24  
Burge Club,  
Mansfield, Georgia

Soque Slam Invitational  
Fishing Rodeo  
Saturday, Oct. 25  
Clarksville, Georgia

Legendary Party  
Saturday, Nov. 1  
Flourish Atlanta

For more information on  
Foundation special events,  
please contact:

Saylor Petrie,  
Special Events Associate  
404-603-5168  
[Saylor.Petrie@shepherd.org](mailto:Saylor.Petrie@shepherd.org)

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# An Intimate Performance for Shepherd's Men

## Benefit Concert Raises \$197,460 for SHARE

By Erin Kenney

Good company, good food, and good music are all perhaps best enjoyed outdoors. And in April, supporters of Shepherd's Men got to enjoy all three at an intimate concert featuring Charlie Starr and Benji Shanks of country-rock outfit Blackberry Smoke.

Hosted by long-time Shepherd Center supporters Kelly and Toby Regal, the concert raised \$197,460 for Shepherd Center's SHARE Military Initiative and The Charlie Daniels Journey Home Project. In addition to a fantastic performance from Blackberry Smoke alumni, attendees were delighted by a special guest, actor Buck Taylor of Tombstone and Yellowstone fame.

Starr, Shanks, and Buck Taylor weren't the only ones who took to the spotlight that evening. Tony Viggiani, a recipient of the Navy Cross and a retired Marine who served for 24 years, shared his powerful account of heroism and leadership in combat, reminding attendees of the extraordinary sacrifices made by those who serve. Carlos Ordóñez, a SHARE graduate, also shared his story of overcoming the unseen injuries of war. You can read more about Carlos' story on page 22.



(above) Charlie Starr poses for a group photo with attendees at the concert. ►  
(left) Blackberry Smoke's Charlie Starr serenaded guests at the benefit concert.

Shepherd's Men extends a special thank you to Muss & Turner's and Whiskey Chef of Local Three for catering, and sponsors including Reformation Brewery, Grizzly Forge, Thomas Arvid, Compass Leather, 10th Mountain Whiskey & Spirit Co., United Distributors, and Tito's Handmade Vodka, for creating a wonderful fundraiser for SHARE.

# Annual Dinner Recognizes Shepherd Volunteers

By Erin Kenney

Volunteers are an integral part of Shepherd Center, often working behind the scenes to help with events, prepare therapy sessions, or feed patients breakfast. But at the annual Volunteer Appreciation Dinner in April, volunteers got to enjoy the spotlight.

At the dinner, Shepherd Center celebrated the amazing volunteers who give their time and talents to serve patients and families. Ben Rose, M.A., one of Shepherd's chaplains, shared a meaningful invocation, and members of Shepherd's leadership team thanked the volunteers for their dedication and hard work.

Emily Brunson, MS, CCC-SLP, a speech-language pathologist in Shepherd Center's Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Rehabilitation Program, was the night's keynote speaker. Emily shared how her brother's SCI brought her family to Shepherd in 2017 and how volunteers had a tremendous impact on their experience. Her experiences led her to become a Shepherd Center volunteer and ultimately pursue a career as a speech-language pathologist.

Volunteer Services staff members Alex Seblatnigg, CAVS, CPXP, Stephany Sancé Hornberger, and Rebecca Shearin recognized volunteers who achieved milestones in the number of hours served.



**"Our volunteers are so dedicated to the Shepherd mission. I'm so grateful and fortunate to work with these folks."**

**– Stephany Sancé Hornberger**

# Shepherd Center welcomed six new members to its Foundation Board of Trustees this year.



**Michael Carter**  
Head of Corporate & Investment Banking, Truist



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## Outgoing Board Chair Andrew Alias Leaves Lasting Impact

By John Ross

Andrew Alias became chairman of the Foundation Board of Trustees during Pursuing Possible: The Campaign for Shepherd Center — a multi-million-dollar campaign that marked Shepherd Center's most ambitious fundraising effort to date. His tenure also coincided with leadership transitions and the hospital's largest expansion ever, underscoring the trust Shepherd's leadership had in him to lead the board.

The Alias family has a history of supporting Shepherd, especially through the Alias Family Sports Teams, and Andrew has a legacy of his own. In 2016, a quiet

donation allowed the Shepherd Strikers Power Soccer Team to afford six new competition-ready wheelchairs. The team would go on to win the Presidents Conference Cup in 2022 and 2024.

Under Andrew's leadership, Pursuing Possible: The Campaign for Shepherd Center has surpassed \$410 million, culminating in ribbon-cutting events for two new transformative buildings. His dedication reflects his family's long-standing commitment to advancing Shepherd Center's mission. The Shepherd Center community is grateful for Andrew's passion and service to the Foundation Board of Trustees.

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 **January 1, 2025 through March 31, 2025.**



The Beta Blockers huddle to talk strategy during this year's annual Field Day. The team would go on to take home the gold.

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Kelly Young



Congratulations to Alex Manning, who completed a 184-mile bike ride for the 10th anniversary of his traumatic brain injury.

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 **January 31, 2025 through March 31, 2025.**

**Cyndae Arrendale**

Mr. and Mrs. John C. Beane  
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**Rebecca Atwell's Birthday**

Ms. Sally Atwell

**BJ Barnham**

Ms. Lori Nolte

**Robin and Charles Bowen's Anniversary**

Mr. and Mrs. John R. Miller

**Benji Bozman**

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**Lucy and Les Brindle's Birthday**

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Ms. Marie Cassandra

**Bryant and Evelyn Coats  
In honor of our friendship**

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**Wayne Moore – Thank you**

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Mrs. Lori Mote

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Sawtooth Oak Farm Hunt

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Dr. Michael Yochelson  
and Mr. Kevin Clift

**Mak Yost**

Ms. Candace English



For Nurse Appreciation Week 2025, nursing teams enjoyed a baseball-themed lunch and dinner. Thank you to our nurses, who always hit it out of the park!

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As construction wrapped up on the Marcus Center for Advanced Rehabilitation, this concrete wall in The Home Depot Foundation Courtyard got a new look. Learn more about the colorful mural on page 2.