

SPINAL COLUMN

SEVEN DAYS

a week in the life of a
BRAIN INJURY PATIENT
at Shepherd Center



FEATURE

Woman who sustained SCI in violent attack gains strength and hope during recovery.

PROFILE

Musician with quadriplegia writes songs and performs, rekindles relationship from years ago.

AND MORE:

Shepherd Center athletes compete in fencing and swimming in Paralympic Games in Beijing.

Monday
06/02/2008

Tuesday
06/03/2008

Wednesday
06/04/2008

S M T W T F S S

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Illustration by Kerry McCaughan Based on a Photo by Gary Meek

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MEEK, TEXT BY JANE M. SANDERS

SEVEN DAYS

A week in the
Life of Brain
Injury Patient
Molly Welch at
Shepherd Center

John and Mary Welch don't know what caused their daughter's car to cross the median of a four-lane Alabama highway and collide with an oncoming truck. But because she had turned on her digital audio recorder before the crash, they have an audio recording of the aftermath of the accident in which other motorists, as well as emergency personnel, worked to free the 21-year-old Auburn University student from her car.

Molly Welch, 21, of Alpharetta, Ga., was returning to Auburn after spending a weekend at home with her family in early February 2008. Once rescue workers removed Molly from her vehicle, she was taken to East Alabama Medical Center in Opelika, Ala., for trauma care. Doctors determined Molly had sustained a severe brain injury, as well as other injuries. She remained in the ICU for three weeks in a minimally conscious state.

On Feb. 28, Molly was transferred to Shepherd Center's ICU. Then she spent several weeks as a minimally conscious patient in Shepherd's Pre-Rehabilitation and Education Program (PREP). After that period of therapy and family training, Molly was sent home for a month until she began to emerge from this low level of cognitive activity. She returned for acute rehabilitation in Shepherd's Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Unit, then continued her therapy as an outpatient at Shepherd Pathways for many weeks.

While at Shepherd, ABI patients undergo an intense routine of daily therapy, including occupational, physical, speech and recreational therapy. They also receive neuropsychological testing and counseling, and participate in classes that teach patients and family members about their injury and how to manage their day-to-day care after leaving the hospital.

While individual patients' functional goals vary, Shepherd Center's ultimate goal is to return patients to their communities to live as independently as possible. This photo essay chronicles a week near the end of Molly's inpatient rehab – an important point in her journey toward restoring her hope for the future.



“The people here are just so dedicated... giving so much of themselves. It shows in all the patients that come here, and that’s why Shepherd has such an awesome reputation.”

— Mary Welch, mother of ABI patient Molly Welch

< PHYSICAL THERAPY

As Molly Welch uses a walker to make her way down a quiet hallway at Shepherd Center, Mary Welch encourages her daughter: “You are doing great. You’re walking. You go, girl.” Molly looks straight ahead and responds to her physical therapist’s instructions with determination as she allows a slight grin at her mother’s praise. Everyone, including Molly, is hopeful today by Molly’s progress in learning to walk again. Physical therapist Rim Hendi and physical therapy assistant Guy Cooper are amazed at the progress Molly has made in just one week.

Later in the session, after physical therapy on a mat, recreational therapist Lora Harvey, who assisted physical therapist Ameer Reiss, says: “We’re working to get Molly out of her chair more to help her get her balance. She was unable to respond to us on her first day. Now, there’s a huge difference. She follows commands, participates in therapy and works very hard. She has a great personality and is doing so well.”

Molly says she is working very hard in therapy because she really wants to go home soon. In fact, she is counting the days until her discharge.

SPEECH THERAPY >

Initially, Molly and speech therapist Emma Quinn established a “yes/no” communication system, allowing Molly to show her therapy team she understood what was going on around her. Soon, she began speaking, and a whole new side of Molly emerged. She participated in tests to evaluate her memory, organization and reasoning skills. Molly struggled with sequencing and remembering daily events, as well as analyzing problems with good judgment. Here, she works on improved vocal quality, meanwhile improving: her memory; insight into her strengths and weaknesses; and ability to simultaneously attend to different concepts.





^ OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

In occupational therapy with therapist Ruth Ann DeFazio, Molly learns how to do various daily activities, such as dressing and feeding herself. On this day, Ruth Ann, left, and occupational therapist intern Amy Studin Glade work with Molly on trunk stabilization while she sits on the edge of a mat and practices taking her socks off and putting them back on. The therapists also assess Molly's upper-extremity range of motion, check her wrist range of motion and test her vision using an eye chart. "Molly is making significant functional progress," Ruth Ann says. "She is motivated, cooperative and eager to do whatever she can to increase her independence."

"The last month has been totally awesome. It's been very inspiring because Molly came from being home in a minimally conscious state to interacting verbally and feeding herself with her left hand. She's walking with assistance. It's just miraculous. There's nothing I can say to explain how a parent feels when all these things come to fruition. It's something you don't anticipate, and when it happens, you're just so elated. Every little bit of progress she makes... is very, very affirming."

— Mary Welch, mother of ABI patient Molly Welch

“I have a lot of faith – faith in God and faith in the people here at Shepherd Center. I trust that they are doing their best for my daughter, and that’s a big relief as a parent.”

— Mary Welch, mother of ABI patient Molly Welch



^ ART THERAPY

Recreational therapist Ashley Haynes leads art therapy sessions with Molly and other patients. On this day, Molly paints and decorates a picture frame. During the session, Molly focuses on fine-motor and eye/hand coordination, attention and visual perceptual skills, as well as having fun. Molly makes her own decisions when designing her frame, giving her a form of independence and a chance to be creative.



< MOLLY'S NURSE

Molly and her family built a close relationship with ABI Unit nurse Monica Parra during Molly’s inpatient stay at Shepherd Center. One common bond Monica shared with John and Mary Welch was parenting special needs children. Molly’s older sister has severe cerebral palsy.

Monica explains her approach to nursing for Molly and all her patients. “I have two special needs children, and I look at my patients as if they were my own children,” Monica says. “I do my best in caring for them.” She felt especially close to Molly and her family because of their common experience, she adds.

The support of Molly’s family not only encouraged Monica as a nurse, she says, but also played a significant role in Molly’s emergence from a minimally conscious state and her subsequent progress in rehabilitation.

John adds: “Monica looks beyond Molly’s medical needs and tunes in to who she is as a person and what her needs are. So she’s very insightful. Molly can express what she’s looking for, and Monica picks up on it.”



MOLLY'S FAMILY SUPPORT >

Throughout her experience, Molly has had incredible support from her family – parents John and Mary Welch, as well as a brother and two sisters.

“Molly is just such a fighter,” Mary says of her daughter’s determination to get better. “We knew already that she was, but we weren’t really anticipating this kind of spirit. And I know that it has to be a lot of Shepherd’s influence on how she feels about herself because she’s really honest with us. She’ll say, ‘I’m sad. I’m sad that I’m different. I’m sad that I’m in a wheelchair. But the people that deal with her on a daily basis are able to take that and acknowledge that it’s a real feeling, but then ask her, ‘OK, now what are you going to do with that kind of energy?’ And, her dad and brother and sisters and I try to encourage her to do her best, to keep working hard and not give up. Her spirit is so strong about trying to be the best she can be that she just oozes a spirit of confidence. We’re just so grateful. She’s our new hero.”

Molly expresses appreciation for her family’s love and attentiveness during her rehabilitation. “They are here every morning and every evening,” she says.

A week before Molly’s discharge from Shepherd Center, Mary anticipates that Molly will “blossom” even more during her outpatient therapy at Shepherd Pathways. She is eager to get her home to be with family and friends, while also connecting with a new community of people at Pathways. “Shepherd does a wonderful job of transferring people from one setting to another so that when we get to Pathways, we will have already toured the facility, met the staff, and we will feel comfortable about it before Molly gets into the program. Once she gets there, I know she’s going to do great.”



“Shepherd is really committed to treating the whole person, and that has freed us up from having to worry because they make sure Molly has what she needs physically, mentally, emotionally – all the therapies that are critical to her healing. There aren’t any gaps, so we can sit back and spend time with Molly and watch the miracles happen.”

— John Welch, *father of ABI patient Molly Welch*

“This experience has made me a whole lot more appreciative of life, of Molly’s life, of our family as a unit, and it also makes me extremely empathetic about other families that go through this experience.”

— Mary Welch, mother of ABI patient Molly Welch

MUSIC THERAPY >

Music therapist Thomas Miller introduces Molly and other patients to a variety of music styles – blues, rock and pop. To begin the session, Molly plays an electronic drum set and sings the chorus to “Ride Sally Ride.” Then Thomas instructs Molly in playing a different drum rhythm for “Don’t Stop Believin’.” Next, Molly and her fellow patients do some wheelchair dancing; Thomas asks the patients to show him some moves. Then Thomas instructs his students in conducting an André Bocelli piece. All of this activity is therapeutic – physically and mentally for the patients.



< MOLLY'S PHYSICIAN

“The staff and Molly’s physician, Dr. (Darryl) Kaelin, who I can’t say enough good things about, are very realistic about Molly’s prognosis,” says Molly’s mother, Mary Welch.

“This situation is a perfect example of when you bring together a determined patient, a supportive, loving family, and a knowledgeable medical, nursing and therapy staff,” says Dr. Kaelin, medical director of the ABI Program. “Together, you can do great things. Despite a severe brain injury, Molly has proven that miracles happen at Shepherd every day, although sometimes at God’s pace, not ours. Molly will continue to improve over the next several months.”



< RECREATIONAL THERAPY

Toward the end of Molly's inpatient rehab, she and recreational therapist Ashley Haynes go on an outing to a nearby store. The excursion gives Molly an opportunity to work on wheelchair mobility on unlevel surfaces, overall endurance, safety awareness, sequencing, following directions, memory and problem solving. Molly struggles with organizing her thoughts and remaining on task, so she follows a shopping list that Ashley provides. "The more we complete tasks in the community, the more comfortable Molly becomes," Ashley says. "On her first group outing, she experienced a bit of stigma. Now, she is more focused on the task and not her disability."

< TO LEARN MORE

To find out more about Molly Welch's brain injury rehabilitation experience at Shepherd Center, go to www.shepherd.org/welch to view a slide show and video clips.

FOLLOWING UP >

Spinal Column featured "Seven Days" in the life of spinal cord injured patient Ed Leatherman in the summer 2008 edition. If you missed it, the magazine is available in PDF format at the Shepherd Center web site at www.shepherd.org/publications. Additional video clips and a slide show are available at www.shepherd.org/leatherman.

At the right, Ed Leatherman receives medication from nurse Erica Garofalo, a member of Shepherd Center's team of dedicated nurses. Erica and other nurses play an important role in Ed's rehabilitation program. In addition to the routine duties of looking after the health of patients, Shepherd nurses go above and beyond every day to assist spinal cord injured patients. For instance, Erica accompanied Ed on a fishing and hunting trip outside the Center in case any medical emergencies arose during the outing.

