

# Return to Practicing Dentistry

**Former brain injury patient Melissa Durand, DMD, makes a full recovery.** BY BILL SANDERS

**Everyone was on their way to church – the Durands, the people in the car in front of them and the ones behind them – when the driver of an oncoming truck, whose tires slipped off the road and prompted him to overcorrect, hit the Durands head on.**

It was Feb. 10, 2008, and Cumming, Ga., dentist Melissa Durand, DMD, was driving to church with her husband in the passenger seat and her two young children in the back. The next thing she remembers, she was three weeks into a five-week stay at Shepherd Center.

When the driver of the truck overcorrected and hit the Durands, Melissa's husband Bert and their two children were essentially uninjured. Meanwhile, first responders presumed Melissa was dying at the scene of the accident.

"I have a patient who works in the vehicular homicide department, and they were the ones called," Melissa says. "They are called when someone is killed or if it looks like they might be."



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**“I had seen others going through driving instruction while I was at Shepherd. What I got (elsewhere) wasn’t nearly that extensive. It made me glad that I stayed at Pathways as long as I did because if I had gone elsewhere to get all the other therapies, I’m sure they wouldn’t have been as good either.”**

“Bert handed the kids over to the people in the car behind us, who as it turns out, I knew, but at the time, he didn’t know that,” she adds. “He was talking to me until the paramedics got there, and eventually I was cut out of the car and airlifted to the hospital.”

Melissa sustained a fracture to her C-2 vertebra, a broken pelvic bone, a broken lower right leg and a traumatic brain injury.

When she got to Shepherd, her life was no longer in danger, but exactly how much of her brain function would return was unknown.

“I needed to get back to a higher level than most brain injury patients had to if I was going to come back to being a dentist,” Melissa explains. “I don’t remember having to relearn things, but I remember having to do so much math work – simple math at first, like seven plus two equals nine – but progressively, it was harder. And I don’t like math.”

The exercise, a common one for brain injury patients, was intended to get Melissa’s brain used to thinking in complex ways again.

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“I won’t say I’m surprised by her recovery, but I am really pleased by it,” Dr. Kaelin says. “Shortly before leaving Shepherd, she had a lot of cognitive issues remaining, and they were of a moderate severity level. She’d made improvements, but she had a long way to go. She continued making progress, and we looked at the requirements for the Georgia dental licensing board and had her go back to the Medical College of Georgia and do some work with previous instructors – kind of like a refresher course.

“Afterwards, we had her work alongside a dentist who was covering her practice in Cumming, and then she started doing things with that dentist supervising,” he adds. “By August 2009, she was back to practicing in a full way.”

Looking back, it was the physical therapy on her leg that was the hardest. “It was worse than having babies,” Melissa says. “But still, Shepherd was unbelievable. I was an inpatient and then at Shepherd Pathways until June 2008. We all wanted to get back to our home, having been in Atlanta for four months. So I ended up doing some of my physical therapy and occupational therapy for driving near my home.

“Looking back on things like the driving instruction, it

was so much more thorough at Shepherd than where I went,” she adds. “I had seen others going through it while I was there. What I got wasn’t that extensive. It made me glad that I stayed at Pathways as long

as I did because if I had gone elsewhere to get all the other therapies, I’m sure they wouldn’t have been as good either.”

Melissa’s father, Bobby Thomas, has a better perspective of Melissa’s care at Shepherd than even she does.

“As is the case with brain injuries, she didn’t think anything was wrong with her other than her leg and pelvis,” Bobby recalls. “She was very irritable and confused, and the staff at Shepherd was very patient with her. Melissa’s behavior wasn’t always cordial, but, of course, it was because of the brain injury. “I think the care that she got at Shepherd was first class,” he adds.

Today, Melissa is almost symptom free. She still can’t straighten her right leg totally, but it is within five degrees of being straight. The nerve damage she had in her foot is gone as is most of the pain in her pelvis. And as far as brain function, she’s totally back to normal.

“I’m hard-headed, so I knew I’d be back as a dentist,” Melissa says. “When I first came back, I wasn’t doing anything other than checking patients’ hygiene and such. Now, I’m back to doing everything.”

And as far as the emotional trauma goes, Melissa says she has none. “I don’t remember any of it, so driving is not a problem,” she explains. “I asked Dr. Kaelin if I was in a coma or a drug-induced coma. He said no, that I couldn’t remember any of it because of post-traumatic amnesia.”

Melissa works three days a week at her dental practice. And as a mom of two young children, she works seven days a week at home.



Photo Courtesy of Melissa Durand

**Facing Page:** Melissa Durand, DMD, returned to her dental practice after brain injury rehabilitation at Shepherd Center. **Above:** Melissa’s husband, Bert, and their children were not injured in the head-on collision that injured Melissa’s brain.



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