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SCI and ABI**

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See Page 3

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## Coming Back

Football players' collision leads to an inspirational friendship.

## Life on Wheels

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## Patient Profile

Former spinal cord injury and MS patient shows a strong spirit through a series of difficult times.

## Secondary Complications

Shepherd Center teams with two other institutions to shed new light on a preventable threat.

# REBUILDING LIVES AFTER **STROKE** INJURES THE BRAIN

Shepherd Center's Young Stroke Program provides specialized rehabilitation to help rebuild lives.

Spring 2011

Photo by Gary Meek



Photo by Louie Favorite



Photo by Louie Favorite



# Rebuilding Lives AFTER **STROKE** Injures the Brain

SHEPHERD  
CENTER'S YOUNG  
STROKE PROGRAM  
PROVIDES  
SPECIALIZED  
REHABILITATION  
TO HELP  
REBUILD LIVES.

BY BILL SANDERS

**Jake Nicolopoulos was eight weeks away from National Signing Day – the biggest day of his young life. For those who follow college football religiously, the event is the biggest day of the off-season.**

When the day came, Jake sent in his signed letter of intent to play football for Clemson University. But a lot happened in the eight weeks between Dec. 9, 2009 and Feb. 3, 2010 – enough that Clemson offered Jake a scholarship, not for what he might mean to the team, but because of what he already meant to the program.

By Feb. 3, 2010, it was clear that Jake was never going to play football at Clemson or anywhere. At just 18 years old, he had a massive stroke on Dec. 9, 2009. A couple of weeks later, he was admitted for brain injury rehabilitation in Shepherd Center's Young Stroke Program.

Believing there was a vacuum in the care for people who experience a stroke at a relatively young age, Shepherd Center created a specialty care program. The hospital takes a multidisciplinary team approach to rehabilitation. Staff

members understand that after a stroke, people are going through more than just recovery; they are learning a new way of life. Rehabilitation at Shepherd is designed to meet the physical, cognitive, medical and emotional needs of each individual, while working toward independence with activities such as school, work, driving, parenting and community involvement. The program, which treats about 90 patients a year, also provides education and training for the patient's family.

The goal for these patients is the same as the goal for all Shepherd patients: Rebuild their lives with hope, dignity and independence.

Today, it's happening for Jake, who lives in Anderson, S.C., not far from Clemson, where he will enroll later this year. It's also happening for Anissa Mayhew, 37, of Newnan, Ga., who has sustained multiple

**Football player Jake Nicolopoulos of Anderson, S.C., experienced a stroke at age 18. He underwent rehabilitation at Shepherd Center and will enroll at Clemson University this fall.**

strokes and has returned to her roles as a nationally known blogger and parent of three young children. And it's happening in the life of Toni Hickman, 36, of Houston, Texas, a mother and hip-hop music artist who sustained a stroke and returned to work and has become an advocate for performing artists with disabilities.

"Shepherd Center specializes in brain and spinal cord injury rehabilitation care for a population of patients who are typically younger than patients at general rehabilitation facilities," says Darryl Kaelin, M.D., medical director of Shepherd's Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Program. "And we develop programs specific to their needs. Most people who have strokes are 65 and older and have had a loss of oxygen to the brain. In our population, the strokes are usually bleeding strokes, which carry a high risk of death, but also a greater potential for recovery if you survive.

"As these patients go back to being moms and dads and employees and students, they need to get their quality of life back," he adds. "That's what we focus on."

### **The Road to Recovery for Jake Nicolopoulos**

Jake Nicolopoulos, now 19, grew up a few miles from Clemson University's Memorial Stadium called "Death Valley." He knew early on that his dream was to run onto that field, wearing the orange and purple, and play football in front of more than 80,000 people.

Turns out, Clemson had the same dream.

In 2009, Jake was ranked as one of the best middle linebackers in the country. He was bigger and stronger than most high school linebackers and was as football-smart as anyone Clemson was recruiting. The two were so fond of each other that Clemson offered a scholarship and Jake unofficially accepted while he was still a junior in high school. Other schools wanted Jake to consider their programs. He had no interest.

**"I was surprised when I was able to go home six weeks later and had gone from Point A to Point X."  
– Anissa Mayhew**

On Dec. 8, 2009, Jake went to bed with a migraine headache that was a little worse than the ones he'd had before.

When he woke up on Dec. 9, still feeling a little funny, he got dressed for school – a little dressier than normal because a Clemson coach was coming to see him that day. But before he left, standing just down the hall from his parents, he had a stroke.

"He came down the hall, turned the corner, and the look on his face was a look of fear, like a deer in the headlights," recalls Jake's mother, Ann Louise Nicolopoulos. "My husband, Craig, and I jumped up and said, 'Jake, Jake, what's wrong?' He couldn't speak. His speech was the first thing that left him. Craig got him on the floor so he could lift his knees above his head to get the blood flowing again. His right leg fell right back down. We called 911, and Jake was fading in and out, and we were begging him to stay with us. I thought I was losing my kid. I was begging God, please let him be OK."

Jake spent a couple of weeks at AnMed Health, an Anderson, S.C., hospital. At first, doctors didn't expect him to live. Even after the swelling in his brain began to subside, his condition was "touch and go" for a while.

But Ann knew where she wanted Jake to be. And she's convinced it was a messenger from God who told her Jake needed to go to Shepherd Center.

The messenger was Chari Ridgeway, a nurse and the mother of former Shepherd Center brain injury patient Shannon Ridgeway of Calhoun Falls, S.C. (Today, Shannon, 25, works in her family's business and volunteers in her community.)

"While we were in the hospital waiting room, Chari came in and introduced herself and said she lived an hour away and had heard about Jake on the news. She said she came to say one thing: 'You need to get him to Shepherd Center. God told us that we needed to tell you to get to Shepherd.'"

## **Shepherd Center Young Stroke Program Highlights**

■ Shepherd Center's Young Stroke Program specializes in caring for people ages 15 to 65 who have experienced a stroke. The program also provides education and training for their families.

■ People who have experienced a stroke may be admitted to Shepherd Center's inpatient rehabilitation program, the Shepherd Pathways Day Program or Pathways Outpatient Program, depending on the severity of illness and medical needs.

■ Services may include: medical management, rehabilitation nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language-cognitive therapy, swallowing therapy, nutritional counseling, respiratory therapy, recreational therapy, vision assessment and treatment, neuropsychological assessment and counseling, and vocational counseling.

The Shepherd Center Young Stroke Program experience, Ann says, was fantastic – from inpatient care to post-acute care at Shepherd Pathways.

“I don’t want to single out any one staff member because they were all so very good and caring,” Ann says. “Jake had one 90-pound therapist at Pathways who just wore him out. She was like what he was used to in a football coach, and it was great for him.”

Today, Jake walks with a slight limp and has little use of his right arm. His speech is still quite limited, but is improving little by little. He understands everything, is responsive, drives a truck and will be starting college this fall.

“Jake will be recovering for the rest of his life,” Ann says. “But the good thing about speech is that it’s one thing that can keep improving, year after year.”

### **The Road to Recovery for Anissa Mayhew**

Doctors were not sure that Anissa Mayhew, 37, would live, much less be able to communicate on a high-functioning level.

Now, Anissa puts sentences together for a living in cyberspace. She is the founder of [www.AimingLow.com](http://www.AimingLow.com), and [FreeAnissa.com](http://FreeAnissa.com), a blog Anissa writes about her life, has more than 8,500 followers.

In the “About” section of her blog is a fancy, beautiful photo of Anissa. The caption reads: “This was me before I got

married, had three kids, had a stroke, had a toddler with cancer, started a blog, then had more strokes and became inspirational. You may not be able to tell from there, but I am totally rolling my eyes. I also used to work at Glamour Shots with WAY too much time on my hands! I just thought you’d enjoy seeing the photo I used to bait the hook that got me a husband.”

Below it is, well, a somewhat more real-life picture. Its caption reads: “This is me every other day of my life. And now I have a handicapped-parking pass that makes me super popular at Walmart. Don’t be jealous. If you ask nice, I’ll take you with me.”

Welcome to Anissa’s talented world, where irreverence is a gift that a series of strokes did not steal.

On Nov. 17, 2009, Anissa was out to lunch when she had a stroke. She’d have another one at the hospital.

“I was in a coma for 10 days,” she says. “They told my husband it didn’t look good. They brought my kids in to say goodbye. But after I saw my kids, my health started to turn around. I started to come out of the coma.”

After discharging from the hospital, Anissa went to a nursing home until she was ready to come to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation in January 2010. She completed Shepherd’s inpatient Young Stroke Program and the post-acute program at Shepherd Pathways.

“Going to Shepherd was incredible,” Anissa says. “I’m still in contact with my therapists in PT, OT and speech. I’ve had some over for dinner. I’m so close to them. Going to Shepherd was a big part

*Continued on Page 9*

**Anissa Mayhew of Newnan, Ga., sustained multiple strokes. After undergoing rehabilitation at Shepherd, she has returned to her roles as a nationally known blogger and parent of three young children.**



■ Specialized services include: assistive technology (computerized assistive devices), wheelchair seating clinic, adaptive driving, upper-extremity clinic, pain management, aquatic therapy, hippotherapy and a transitional living apartment.

■ Clients have access to the newest technology, including: Vital Stim, sEMG biofeedback, Bioness, Lokomat, Saeboflex, Lite Gait, Balance Master, and functional electrical stimulation (FES) bike for arms and legs.

■ More than 95 percent of people who complete Shepherd Center’s Young Stroke Program are discharged to their home, rather than a long-term care facility, compared to 58 percent nationally in 2009-2010.

■ Visit [shepherd.org/stroke](http://shepherd.org/stroke) for more information about Shepherd Center’s Young Stroke Program and clinical outcomes.

# Specialized **Stroke** Care

## Shepherd Center focuses on both the patient and family.

BY BILL SANDERS

Speech-language pathologist Cindy DuBose, SLP, who joined the Shepherd Center Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Program staff in January 2010, looks at the rehabilitation hospital's facilities, staff, programs and outcomes with a sense of wonder that usually comes from newcomers.

But even senior staff members at Shepherd, from time to time, step back and say, "Wow!"

DuBose has worked as a speech-language pathologist for more than 12 years at some top-notch facilities. But the recoveries she's seen at Shepherd – particularly with some of the young stroke patients – have left her amazed.

"I had heard about how great Shepherd Center is before I joined the staff," DuBose says. "But you can't really understand how great it is until you get here. It is not just the advanced

stroke has occurred when a patient is admitted to Shepherd's intensive care unit, says Eugenia Herbst, OTR, post-acute occupational therapy manager. The patient can then progress to inpatient therapy at Shepherd's main campus and post-acute outpatient therapy at Shepherd Pathways in nearby Decatur, Ga. (See bulleted list of services.)

The continuum of care – which consistently draws families to Shepherd for stroke care for their loved ones – also includes brain injury education, training and peer support for the patient and family, Herbst notes. In addition, Shepherd provides complimentary housing for family members so they can be near their loved ones during rehabilitation.

"Family members say they are so moved with how Shepherd staff care about them so much, not just their loved one who was injured," DuBose says. "The family receives a lot of education and resources to learn about strokes, and then we all work as a team. I'm using interdisciplinary therapy approaches in ways that I had never done in other facilities. Often, I work alongside an occupational therapist (OT)

or physical therapist (PT), helping the patient on his or her speech or swallowing while the PT helps the patient with walking, or the OT helps with feeding or grooming."

Shepherd also offers the latest in therapeutic and assistive technologies that help make it a leader in treating young stroke patients, says Darryl

Kaelin, medical director of Shepherd's ABI Program.

"The technology contributes significantly to the great outcomes we're getting," he says. "The younger stroke population has more physical endurance so they can better utilize the technology that is available. Families often seek out Shepherd because they learn about the technologies we have and the promise they provide for greater hope for their loved one's recovery."

Among the therapeutic technologies offered are: Bioness' wireless functional electrical stimulation (FES) devices for upper and lower extremities; FES bikes for use in physical therapy; fiberoptic endoscopic evaluation of swallowing (FEES) and VitalStim therapy for swallowing; and Saebo's functional dynamic neurological orthoses to improve grasp-and-release activities in people with little residual arm and hand function.

Dalise Robinson, SLP, speech therapy manager at Shepherd's post-acute rehabilitation facility, Shepherd Pathways, sees patients at various stages of their recovery. But there are some commonalities among all young stroke patients, and those are a large focus of Pathways' rehabilitation care.

"Cognitive communication skill deficits are always present with strokes, and we address that in an intensive manner," Robinson says. Therapists also work to help patients reacquire the social skills associated with speech and other forms of communication.

"We're addressing not only functional language but the social, pragmatic issues that occur with young strokes," she explains. "How do you re-engage with those around you in a social manner? We offer group treatment where patients have the opportunity to develop social-communication skills in a therapeutic environment with peer support. This fosters patient confidence prior to transitioning their newly learned skills into the community setting."



Speech-language pathologist Cindy Dubose, left, works with patient Sunday Taylor alongside physical therapist Janelle Kenny.

therapy techniques, but the atmosphere of the entire center. Everyone is so focused on improving the lives of the people injured and their families, and that's the No. 1 priority."

At Shepherd, a multidisciplinary team focuses on rehabilitating the patient in a comprehensive continuum of care. Rehabilitation can begin soon after a

**Toni Hickman of Houston, Texas, a mother and hip-hop music artist who sustained a stroke, returned to work and has become an advocate for performing artists with disabilities.**

Photo by Eric Kayne



of me being pushed toward recovery. They didn't put limitations on how well I could get. As hard as I was willing to work, they'd push me."

Anissa didn't realize just how much progress she was making until she got home. That made her all the more grateful, she says.

"I was surprised when I was able to go home six weeks later and had gone from Point A to Point X," Anissa explains. "Things had changed so much, and from then to now, the difference is huge."

Anissa improved during her stay in the inpatient program. But upon discharge, she still used a wheelchair full time, her right arm didn't move, her right leg was weak and she had issues with balance, stamina and energy. "I was apprehensive about talking to people because of the cognitive issues," she recalls. "I'd text or email, but not talk on the phone."

Soon, Anissa started outpatient therapy at Shepherd Pathways and made great improvements. "I'm still in a wheelchair, but have started to stand up, walk with a walker or a cane," she notes. "When I graduated from Pathways, I was apprehensive at first, but they had given me instructions, exercises and things to work on. I'm determined and continue to see progress."

### **The Road to Recovery for Toni Hickman**

Toni Hickman was in New Orleans in 2007, working to make her dream come true. A hip-hop music artist from Atlanta, Toni had wanted this career since she was 10 years old.

She was negotiating a deal in the Big Easy when she started vomiting. Toni had a bit of a headache, too. But there was also this factor weighing heavily on her mind: She'd had a brain aneurysm in 2004, and the symptoms were similar.

That time, her mother took her to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, where she was diagnosed. "They did surgery to clamp off the bleeding, and after a few months, I was pretty much back to normal," Toni says.

But this time, her condition was much more severe.

"My mom came from Atlanta to New Orleans the day of the surgery. The doctors at Tulane University Hospital told her they didn't know if or how I would come out of recovery, nor could they tell her if I would ever walk or talk again. She was also told that she might have to consider putting me in nursing home," Toni says.

But a therapist at Tulane had another suggestion. She recommended that Toni go to Shepherd Center, and soon, Toni was admitted.

She spent six months at Shepherd Pathways, relearning how to walk and talk, and regaining the self-confidence necessary for a career in entertainment.

"Coming to Shepherd was one of the best things that could have happened to me," Toni says. "They were all so very encouraging. It wasn't like a regular rehabilitation center. They held

a couple of dances while I was there and did so many things that encouraged me.

"After the second brain surgery, I couldn't talk, and my brain was very slow," she explains. "I couldn't count money or do that kind of basic math. It gradually came back, but even then, my whole right side was basically paralyzed. I was in a wheelchair for months."

Toni had regained some function before she came to Shepherd Center. "I was walking, but with a cane when I got there," she recalls. "They helped me get rid of the cane and worked on my gait. And they put me in speech therapy, which helped with retraining my brain. I was still forgetful and not organized."

Today, Toni has not let the aneurysms slow her down. Since completing rehabilitation at Pathways, she has released her first CD, "Crippled Pretty," is building a career as a public speaker and has written a book titled "Chemical Suicide," which focuses on the harmful ingredients in common skin and hair products.

"The album did pretty good – really good considering it was just me, independently released," Toni says. "I'm working on my next project, but this one is with another artist."

Toni's doctors don't know what caused the aneurysms, and that's not uncommon as there often is no known cause. "I think it might have been stress because those were very stressful times," she adds. "Things are good now, though, and I'm pressing forward."

**Since completing rehabilitation at Pathways, Toni has released her first CD, "Crippled Pretty." She is building a career as a public speaker and has written a book titled "Chemical Suicide."**



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