

## Coach Credits Rehabilitation Therapists For Helping Him Recover From Spinal Cord Injury

**W**es Newton is not only lucky to be alive – he’s lucky to be walking.

Last July, the Wharton High School chemistry teacher and track and field coach was standing on a ladder using a chain saw to trim an oak tree on his Brooksville farm. A large branch knocked him to the ground and fell on top of him. The chain saw landed just inches from the top of his head – and was still running.

“I was flat on my back. I was awake. I wasn’t in any pain until I tried to move,” said Wes. “I tried to reach in my pocket for my cell phone and couldn’t move my arms.”

He knew he was in serious trouble and needed help, but his wife Laura was working on the other side of their farm. “I was whistling and yelling and thought this could be it, but I knew to remain calm.”

About 30 minutes later Laura found him and called 911. Paramedics determined he had a spinal cord injury and gave him a choice: go to the local hospital, or to Tampa General Hospital.

Without hesitation Wes said, “I’m going to Tampa General.”

He’s never regretted making that crucial decision.

Wes was admitted to the Neuroscience Intensive Care Unit with a broken neck, and five broken ribs. Neurosurgeons performed a delicate five-hour surgery.

Wes and his wife had an active lifestyle on their farm and were building their dream



*Former patient Wes Newton recently reunited with the therapists he credits for helping him make a full recovery. Pictured with Wes from left are Heather Shaw, outpatient occupational therapist; Maggie Dewberry, outpatient physical therapist; Jessica Cohen, inpatient occupational therapist; and Christina Potter, inpatient physical therapist.*

log cabin. Laura knew her husband needed to make a full recovery to continue their life there.

Through research she found hand and leg exercises for his type of injury and encouraged him to start during his first days in the hospital. Initially he got tired after a few repetitions, but he pushed himself to do more.

“I knew I needed to get into rehab, and I wanted it to be at Tampa General,” he said. A few weeks later he was admitted to TGH’s Rehabilitation Center and began working with Physical Therapist Christina Potter and Occupational Therapist Jessica Cohen.

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# Patient Makes Remarkable Progress One Step At A Time

**R**obin Fleischaker will always remember May 21, 2010. It's the day her life – and the life of her daughter Abigail – changed forever.

Abigail, then 18 years old, was walking home after an early-morning breakfast. As she crossed Fowler Avenue, a car traveling 45-miles-per-hour hit her.

She was rushed to Tampa General Hospital's Emergency & Trauma Center with multiple injuries including a traumatic brain injury, a broken back and neck, broken ribs, a cracked pelvis, a broken leg and a collapsed lung. Abigail was so badly injured Robin didn't recognize her when she arrived at the hospital.

She underwent numerous surgeries, including neurosurgery, and spent weeks in intensive care and months in the hospital.

"They're incredible here," said Robin. "I can't say enough about the nurses and the team on the Neuro floor. They're on top of their game. Everyone looked out for her."

For months, Abigail, who was always outgoing, was unable to speak. But eight months after the accident, she spoke



*Abigail Fleischaker rides the MOTOMed machine to improve her leg flexibility and strength.*

her first words, "I love you," to her aunt.

Eventually Abigail's personality, sense of humor and compassion also returned. "We hold on to the fact that she's still there. She's still Abigail," Robin said.

She later began speech, occupational and physical therapy at Tampa General's Rehabilitation Center.

Occupational Therapist Heather Shaw worked with Abigail on basic skills like sitting up without assistance, brushing her teeth and feeding herself.

"Her mom was really good about getting her to practice everything I asked," Heather said. "She has some of the best follow-through of anyone I've treated."

Now she's able to do all of her grooming and dressing and other self-care tasks, Heather said. "It's nice to see your hard work pay off in the end," she said.

Physical Therapist Steve Wesenhagen has worked with Abigail since the first day she came to the Rehab Center on a stretcher. She's received physical therapy twice a week ever since and has made remarkable progress.

"She keeps getting stronger and hasn't plateaued yet," said Steve.

A few months ago, Abigail reached a major milestone: she started walking. During her therapy sessions, Steve puts a gait belt around her waist and holds it from behind to guide her as she walks around the therapy room. She recently began extending her walks throughout the first floor of the Rehab Center. Her balance and posture are consistently improving too.

"I'm excited about walking around," said Abigail with a smile. She walks around the house and helps with setting the table and putting away her laundry.

Thanks to her progress, Abigail can now go on outings for the first time too, and she and her mother recently went to see her first movie since the accident.



*Physical Therapist Steve Wesenhagen guides Abigail Fleischaker as she walks during a therapy session.*

Robin is grateful for the care Abigail has received at the Rehab Center. "The rehab team has been phenomenal," she said. "Steve has been consistently aware and interested in looking for the next best thing to help her. He's a godsend and has been amazing." Abigail looks forward to her therapy sessions too, she said.

Karen Zinszer, the Rehab Center's outpatient outcomes manager, has witnessed Abigail's improvements since the first day she arrived on a stretcher.

"I've watched her progress from that phase to now being able to carry on a conversation and function much more independently," Karen said. The therapy has improved the quality of her life, as well as for her mother, she said.

For Robin, the biggest reward of all often comes directly from her daughter.

"Abigail will tell me she appreciates what I do," Robin said. "She says she's very grateful she has another chance at life."

## Art Therapy Class Provides Creative, Healing Outlet For Patients

Rehabilitation Center patient Monique Grant didn't let her cervical spine pain hamper her creativity.

With the help of Julianne Desjardine, an intern with the University of Tampa's Art Therapy program, Monique sat in her wheelchair as she carefully placed wet gauze on plastic molds to fashion two face masks. She made wide lips on one mask and funny ears on the other. After the gauze dried, Monique planned to paint them with bright colors.

The masks would be gifts for her niece and nephew.

Monique was one of several Rehabilitation Center patients participating in a new art therapy program held each Monday at the center. The year-long program, launched in January, is offered through funding provided by a gift from a Tampa General Hospital Foundation donor in conjunction with the Arts Council of Hillsborough County and Arts for Health Tampa Bay.

The program's goal is to give patients opportunities to express themselves through art. During the two-hour sessions, they can paint, create unique pieces of pottery, draw, or make other



Heather Spooner, left, director of Arts for Health Tampa Bay, and a UT Art Therapy instructor, and Julianne Desjardine, a UT Art Therapy intern, help patient Monique Grant build a face mask.

types of original artwork, said Heather Spooner, a University of Tampa Art Therapy instructor, and the director of Arts for Health Tampa Bay, who oversees the TGH program.

Therapy through art gives patients an opportunity to express emotions that they may not be able to verbalize, Heather explained. Many patients may have injuries that make it difficult for them to communicate, and creating art gives them a new outlet for expression.

Monique agreed. "It gets my mind off the reason I'm here," she said. "It's a different surrounding. It feels good to come here with other people."

Recreational Therapist Kathryn Gordon said the class can help manage patients' pain and build their physical endurance without making them feel like they're in therapy.

Another patient, Octavia Stoppa, sat quietly in her wheelchair while she carefully chose colors for the picture she was painting with watercolor pencils. Although it was her first class, Octavia quickly became immersed in her creation. She planned to use the picture to cover a gift box for her husband.

"I like it," she said of the class. "It's peaceful."

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"His fine motor skills were lacking," said Jessica. "He couldn't button his shirt or put on his socks, but you could see he was motivated."

Christina remembers he had difficulty keeping his balance and couldn't stand without assistance.

He endured weeks of intensive therapy – set goals and tapped into his training as an athlete and a coach to push himself to do more than was expected. It paid off.

"Both of them worked tirelessly with me," Wes said. "I felt like I did when I played football. I made up my mind I was going to come out of this. If they asked me to do something 10 times, I'd do it 15 times. To be a good athlete, you have to work through pain."

By his third day in rehab, he hit his first milestone: he stood up. "The biggest thrill of my life was to stand up," said Wes. A few weeks later he was able to run down the hall.

"By the end, we were walking around campus. We walked to the ER, the gift shop and all around the building," said Christina.

Wes continued outpatient therapy at the Rehabilitation Center with Physical Therapist Maggie Dewberry and Occupational Therapist Heather Shaw.

"He came in walking, so we worked on his endurance," said Maggie.

It took less than a year for Wes to make a full recovery. The couple moved into their new log cabin, and Wes returned to his job at Wharton High ahead of schedule.

He rides his horses several times a week, takes walks around his property, lifts weights, and runs two to three miles every day.

"I am so glad I went to Tampa General," Wes said.

"I couldn't have asked for a better situation when I was there. I owe my entire recovery to my therapists. I'm indebted to them."



Rehabilitation Center patient Octavia Stoppa paints a picture with watercolor pencils.

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## About Tampa General Hospital Rehabilitation Services

Rehabilitation Services at Tampa General Hospital are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for the following programs for adults and children:

- Comprehensive Integrated Inpatient Rehabilitation Program
- Outpatient Interdisciplinary Chronic Pain and Headache Management Rehabilitation Program
- Inpatient and Outpatient Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Programs
- Inpatient and Outpatient Brain Injury Rehabilitation Programs
- Inpatient Stroke Rehabilitation Program

Rehabilitation Services is also



designated by the Florida Department of Health as a provider of services to both adult and pediatric Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Program (BSCIP) patients; our services are accredited by The Joint Commission, and TGH is proud to be a Magnet hospital.

In addition to inpatient programs, Rehabilitation Services' continuum of care includes services provided by hospital-based rehabilitation therapists and physician services for new and follow-up patients in the Rehabilitation Medical Clinics.



### REHABILITATION CENTER

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