

JAMES H. SHEPHERD Shepherd Center

At the age of 22, James Shepherd set out on a backpacking trip around the world that would change his life in more ways than one. While bodysurfing off a beach in Rio de Janeiro, he nearly drowned when a wave slammed his body against the ocean floor, instantly paralyzing him from the neck down. After six months of intensive rehabilitation, Shepherd regained his ability to walk while using a cane and a leg brace. After returning home to Atlanta, the Shepherd family was frustrated with the lack of rehabilitation care options in the Southeast. With his parents' enthusiastic support, he founded the Shepherd Center in 1975 as a six-bed unit operating out of leased space in an Atlanta hospital. Almost immediately there was a waiting list. But Shepherd recognized that it wasn't enough to build a hospital to treat people for an illness or injury. He had to work to change the community to which the patients would return. Working with a full-time advocacy specialist, he increased Georgia's accessibility: getting lifts added to the MARTA bus system, making Hartsfield Airport one of the country's most accessible, and encouraging increased accessibility to the Georgia Dome – all before the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act.



After suffering a life-changing injury, James Shepherd (left) has dedicated his career to improving the quality of life of individuals with brain and spinal cord injuries. Pictured with Shepherd and another patient is U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson.

Because of his efforts, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) mandated that all cities seeking to be the site of future Olympic games must include plans and proposed financing for the Paralympics using the same sites and facilities as part of their formal bid.