



***Alana Shepherd,
Co-Founder, Board Member
Shepherd Center of Atlanta***

Restoring Hope & Rebuilding Lives

If you haven't read the book by John Yow entitled "Restoring Hope, Rebuilding Lives: The Story of the Shepherd Center," then you probably don't know the whole story of Alana Shepherd.

You may know her name, her reputation as a fundraiser and community leader; or as the recipient of the Shining Light Award; or even the fact that she led the Buckhead Coalition and was invited to join corporate boards when most women weren't welcome.

But, there's so much more to who she really is.

John Yow's book chronicles the inspiring 25 year history of the Shepherd Center – how it started from a tragic surfing accident in Brazil involving Alana's son, James Shepherd in 1973, and how it's become one of the finest catastrophic care centers in the country. But this profile is a tribute to Alana herself – wife, mother, grandmother, leader and – as many would say – *patron saint* of those with spinal and brain injuries and neuromuscular disorders.

Mid-western roots, Southern nurture

The South did not give rise to the woman we've come to know as a "fixture" in and around Atlanta. She was actually born in Sioux City, Iowa, the daughter of a veterinarian who specialized in serum manufacturing and distribution. At the age of 13, Alana moved to Atlanta with her family to follow her father's business. While her brother entered Marist and later graduated from Georgia Tech, Alana attended North Avenue Presbyterian School (NAPS) - which evolved into Westminster, one of Atlanta's premier private schools.

Alana has fond memories of her early years in Atlanta – when Mayor Hartsfield lived down the street and Jimmy Caswell, who developed Piedmont Center, was a close friend.

"It was a wonderful time to grow up in Atlanta - you knew everyone in all the schools across the city, everyone went to the Friday night dances, including a boy named Harold Shepherd," Alana said.

Showing signs of her innate talent and intelligence even in her youth, Alana completed NAPS at 16 and headed to Missouri where she attended Stephens College – a two-year, all-girls’ school. “I liked it and I took every class they offered.” Interestingly, she says she probably wouldn’t choose a same-gender college today, but one wonders if there wasn’t something in that experience that fueled her confidence and competence for the leadership roles she would assume later in life.

Alana returned to Atlanta after she graduated from Stephens and found a job most people wouldn’t expect. She was an “undercover detective.” Actually, she was hired to go on retail excursions and evaluate the shopping experience. “It was fun!” she added.

A joint venture begins

Before long, however, love and marriage would take her in an entirely different direction. She and Harold had dated throughout her years at Stephens and now it was time to make a life together. Married at Druid Hills Presbyterian Church in 1949, the young couple began a journey that has lasted almost six decades.

Like Alana, Harold comes from strong stock. He grew up during the Depression, one of six children, and “a hundred mules.” The mules were the equivalent of the heavy machinery of the day and were extremely important to his family and to his father’s road building business.

That road building business (Shepherd Constructions Company) would, of course, eventually become “THE” family business for Harold, his brothers, and later, the next generation of Shepherds.

In addition to growing their business, Alana and Harold also grew their family by three - twins (a boy and girl - James and Dana) and another son, Tommy. Earlier in their married life, Alana followed Harold’s work to South Georgia as well as North Carolina, but when the children came along, they settled in Atlanta permanently. Alana got involved in everything from Brownies and Scouting to Garden Clubs and beyond. While Harold traveled, she took good care of the home front.

From crisis to a new mission

By virtually all measures, life was good to the Shepherds and their family – until 1973. Then, everything changed. James was a young man taking a break after graduating from UGA - a surfing trip to Brazil. Neither Alana nor anyone could have imagined what would happen as a result of that trip and James’ accident.

Clearly, James would have died had it not been for the heroic medical and family efforts that were brought to bear on his case in the hours, days, and weeks following the accident. But, the real awakening came when Alana and her family realized that once James was safely back home, there was no facility in the Southeast, much less Atlanta, to care for his catastrophic spinal injuries or the long-term rehabilitation he would require.

James would spend the next 4 ½ months at the Craig Center in Denver, CO – far from home but in a place that could provide what he needed. Perhaps it was providential that this happened, because this experience literally cemented the Shepherd’s determination to “do something” about creating a place like this in Atlanta.

But, to go from the idea to reality was anything but easy. “How is this going to happen?” Alana and her family asked themselves. But true to her nature, Alana didn’t waste time focusing on the obstacles. She simply proceeded to overcome them one at a time – like stacking building blocks.

The first issue was securing space in an existing facility and finding the right medical team. For this, Alana turned to none other than Dr. David Apple. His contribution to the start-up of the Shepherd Center was immeasurable – as it has been ever since. A second major issue was raising seed capital – funding - which Alana took on with a passion (and continues to do so today.) Third, and perhaps the most critical issue of all: establishing credibility in the healthcare field.

After spending the first seven years as a not-for-profit organization within a for-profit hospital, the time came to move to the next stage for the Shepherd Center. Atlanta developer, Scott Hudgens, made it possible, offering prime property next to Piedmont Hospital for a stand-alone facility. He personally contributed \$200,000 the initial building fund. Hope turned into reality in 1982 when the Shepherd Center on Peachtree Rd. opened for patients. A decade later, the facility was expanded to 32,000 square feet.

Thanks to word of mouth testimonies from patients and their families, countless fundraisers and talks to groups who might contribute (e.g., garden clubs and even a motorcycle group who gave \$800) - and the phenomenal credibility earned within the medical community, the Shepherd Center has established itself as the envy of rehab centers around the country and the world.

Today, James serves as the chairman of the board and both Alana and Harold are directors. The center is continuing to expand (250,000 square feet and counting) and treats more spinal cord injuries than any other rehabilitative hospital in the nation. Under Alana and her family’s leadership and guidance, the Center has become a leading advocate for all people of disabilities. This was clearly exemplified by the Shepherd Center’s role as the founding sponsor of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games. And while the Center has evolved dramatically since its inception, the mission remains constant: to return catastrophically injured patients to the highest level of functioning possible, enabling them to continue their lives with hope, dignity and independence.

The woman behind the myth

If her accomplishments make you humble, even remind you of Mother Theresa, then you should know she’s also real and very down to earth. Her office is barely big enough to turn around in so clearly the trappings of power do not impress her. She may have been the first woman to break some of the leadership barriers around town (e.g., first woman director on the Wachovia and Genuine Parts Boards and first to lead the Buckhead

Coalition), but she admires other leaders who may have done as well or better than she. Rather than play the “B” card when she may have been treated differently because she was a female, she simply responded with a remark appropriate for the occasion, but always lady-like and without a hard edge.

“I attribute part of my style or manner to my mid-western beginnings where people tend to be natural, but direct and matter of fact. I don’t beat around the bush, but I sometimes use humor to defuse an otherwise sticky situation,” she said.

When she’s not advocating for people with disabilities, she likes to do arts and craft projects. “I just spent the morning making a bridal shower gift for my grandson’s fiancé. I also used to love to make my own clothes!”

And who would have guessed? Alana is a “wing shooter.” She likes to shoot quail and dove despite the fact that she’s also an avid bird watcher. Sounds like a conflict but not in her way of looking at it. Now that she and Harold are no longer spring chickens, she admits that at the end of the day, she actually feels tired. (Imagine that!)

Nevertheless, she always finds time for her children and the rest of her family, for friends (but not for bridge), for ALTA tennis, for traveling and - as often as possible - for long week-ends, including antiquing with Harold.

As most people know, Alana is a most often seen at the Shepherd Center - and she does whatever needs to be done to raise awareness and funds for the Center’s mission. Most Atlantans know who she is and what she and her family have done. They are inspired by her and in awe of her family’s commitment to establish a rehabilitation and research facility like the Shepherd Center – one that has helped restore hope to so many children and adults over the years.

But like all truly great leaders, Alana remains humble. “We did not want the center named for us but we were overruled. People said, ‘It’s the identity which has been established and we can’t change that.’”

Well, Alana’s identity has been established, too. This is a woman, and indeed a family, who sees everything they’ve contributed - not as an obligation – but as a privilege. Nevertheless, anyone who comes in contact with Alana Shepherd knows the truth: the highest privilege of all is to know her. Sam Massell, president of the Buckhead Coalition, was absolutely right when he said, “She’s one of a kind.”

A Shining Light to us all.

Profile written by Susan B. Hitchcock
Turknett Leadership Group
SHEroes Project
May, 2007

