

PT *InMotion*

Defining Moment: From Patient to Partner

A transformative relationship, in many ways

Polly Swingle, PT, GCS, CEEAA, RYT

When I first saw Charlie Parkhill, I had no idea he would become such an important figure in my life. I just thought I could help him.

It was 1998 and I was working as a physical therapist (PT) at the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan in the town of Novi. Charlie, a certified public accountant with a successful business, had sustained a severe neck injury while on vacation with his wife in Mexico. The wave that knocked him down had bruised and partially severed his spinal cord. Physicians had told him he'd never walk again.

He'd originally worked with another PT at my facility, but I asked my supervisor if I could add him to my schedule. I'd seen how hard he worked and how open he was to trying anything that might advance his recovery. I am, and always have been, a voracious follower of the latest developments in the scientific literature. I'd been intrigued and inspired by some exciting things I'd



Polly Swingle, PT, GCS, CEEAA, RYT, with her business partner and former patient Charlie Parkhill.

been reading about emerging animal research with unweighted treadmills and the potential benefits of taking a more aggressive treatment approach to patients with certain types of spinal cord injuries.

Once I began working with Charlie on a high-intensity rehabilitation program, it didn't take long for both of us to realize we were on the right track. I still can remember with perfect clarity the day Charlie got up on the

unweighted treadmill and was able to take his first steps since his injury. For a man who had been told by doctors that he would never walk again, that was huge.

As Charlie's PT, it was a big moment for me, as well. In fact, it was the moment when everything clicked.

In a career that's been full of rewarding experiences and exhilarating breakthrough moments, that one still stands out. It not only affirmed that my instincts were on track, but it also demonstrated the extraordinary things that can happen when patients and PTs are unwilling to entertain words such as "hopeless" and "impossible."

Charlie is the kind of person and patient who inspires me to do this work—and who motivates me to keep pushing the envelope with promising new therapies, treatments, and techniques. His motivation and willingness to embrace hard work were—and remain—absolute. From the start, he was all in. And just as important as his commitment to the process was the trust that he placed in me. He believed in what we were doing together. We forged an immediate and lastingly strong connection.

It is impossible for any PT not to respond to that. It lights your fire and fuels your motivation. Working together as a team, Charlie and I have dramatically improved his quality of life. From standing unassisted, to taking his first unassisted steps, to ultimately regaining the ability to travel the world with his wife, Charlie's story is one of reclaimed independence.

But what truly amazes me to this day is where that first breakthrough moment on the treadmill ultimately took us. I say "us" because Charlie's initial steps on the treadmill also were the first steps of a journey he and I would take toward becoming business partners.

He and I had been working together in high-intensity sessions several times a week for nearly 2 years. I was feeling constrained working in a traditionally structured hospital rehabilitation environment. I wanted to be able to offer more patients the opportunities that Charlie had seized. I wanted to practice where I could put new ideas to work quickly. I had been doing some work on the side, nights and weekends, providing in-home rehabilitation services to people with spinal cord injuries. This "moonlighting" felt like what I should be doing full-time. I was nervous, however, about striking out on my own.

When I mentioned my dilemma to Charlie, he surprised me by immediately proposing that we join forces professionally. Drawing on his background as a CPA, he worked with me to develop a business plan. Within 3 months we were up and running. The Recovery Project was born. We initially rented space from the local YMCA. Within a year we had 6 full-time employees. Today we have 2 full-service, independent locations in Southeast Michigan, with a staff of approximately 40, including 11 PTs.

The Recovery Project's mission is to ensure the highest possible quality of life for individuals with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries, and for patients with other neurological disorders. We embrace high-intensity therapy and cutting-edge rehabilitative science. We specialize in working with highly motivated individuals who are determined to do what Charlie has done: to ensure that their recovery, not their injury, defines their life.

Education and learning are at the heart of my personal and professional identity. In a profession that is rapidly evolving, infused with emerging and potentially transformative opportunities, there always are new certifications

to earn, promising therapies to try, and innovative approaches to take to help patients reach their full potential. Like my business partner and former patient Charlie, I am all in.

This work is my calling. Every patient's case is different; nothing is rote. The field holds tremendous opportunities for creativity and customized therapy. The potential always is there to help people who have suffered a devastating injury make dramatic improvements in their quality of life.

If all that weren't enough to wake me with a smile and an itch each morning, the close relationships we forge in the clinic allow me to be part of my patients' lives for many years. They, in turn, become an important part of my life. I'm honored to call many of them friends. And then, of course, there's the former patient I call partner.

I was right, as it turned out: I could help Charlie. But little did I know that he would more than return the favor by making it possible for me to pursue—with high intensity—my own true passion in physical therapy. ■

The Recovery Project provides aggressive, focused and effective physical and occupational therapy and training to people with traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, and other neurological disorders. Through personalized therapy programs designed and administered by highly trained and compassionate staff, utilizing the latest evidence-based research and state-of-the-art equipment at accessible locations in Livonia, Mich., and Clinton Township, Mich., The Recovery Project produces hope and life-changing results for clients and their support networks. For more information, visit www.therecoveryproject.net or call (855) 877-1944.
