

Inside Chicago's Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, the world-renowned rehab facility

September 2 2022, by Shanzeh Ahmad



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Phillip Cline, 59, distinctly remembers the moment he became paralyzed from the neck down. He was run off the road while driving a motorcycle on July 4, 1996, at 1:20 p.m. in Wisconsin.

He spent nine years in a wheelchair, he recalled, as he was taking a long walk on a treadmill during a visit to the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood on a recent Wednesday.

"They showed me a picture from when I first got here," he said. "I looked like I was dead. Compared to me now. I can't believe it, and no one else can either. But, I'm a hard worker."

Cline graduated from wheelchair to a walker, then from crutches to a cane. He's now able to "do anything" at his house, he said, like cook, clean and live life.

"It's night and day," he said, from the time he arrived at Shirley Ryan in 1996 to now.

"I thought it was too late, but I kept trying."

The Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, formerly known as the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, has a reputation for working miracles. It's perhaps why two of the city's recent high-profile patients, Chicago police Officer Danny Golden and a Highland Park parade shooting survivor, 8-year-old Cooper Roberts, both ended up at the Streeterville facility this summer.

"We have patients from all over the world who come here because they know of our reputation," said Nancy Paridy, co-president and chief administrative officer of Shirley Ryan. "They know we have what it takes to get the best outcome for them."

U.S. News and World Report has named Shirley Ryan the top physical medicine and [rehabilitation hospital](#) in the country for the last 32 years, and Shirley Ryan is the only hospital to have held the top spot for so long, Paridy said.

It's been the go-to hospital for patients like Golden, who was shot and injured July 9 while off-duty. He was trying to break up a bar fight in the Beverly neighborhood, according to police.

The 31-year-old was told he was permanently paralyzed from the waist down and would never walk again, his family said. But Golden has an army of supporters, many of whom were confident he would make a comeback with the help of the folks at Shirley Ryan.

"Danny has showed us that good can come in any situation," Golden's cousin Jack Gorman said in July.

Golden told his family and friends after finding out Cooper, 8, would also be at Shirley Ryan, "I can't wait to meet my new buddy," according to Gorman.

Cooper and his family have called the lab home for weeks after the Highland Park shooting on Independence Day, where Cooper was shot and paralyzed from the waist down when, according to prosecutors, 21-year-old Robert "Bobby" Crimo III opened fire on the holiday parade, killing seven people.

After spending nearly a month at Comer Children's Hospital in critical and serious condition, transferring Cooper to the lab gave the Roberts family hope.

Although the prognosis is still unknown, the family and team of doctors behind Cooper's survival remain hopeful, his mother Keely Roberts said.

"Even 50 days past his injury, the doctors don't know what he may get back and what limitations we will live with for his lifetime," the family said in a statement. "We do know that we are infinitely grateful for his survival, and for the many kindnesses we continue to receive, including

from all who are working to help Cooper and others impacted heal from this nightmare."

In a video that the family shared, the boy is shown racing one of his occupational therapist, Cassie Powers, in his wheelchair in a hallway of the lab while other staff members at the lab cheer. But the young boy is beginning to recognize the severity of his limitations as he participates in daily rigorous physical and occupational therapy, the family said.

"What will I do at recess?" he asked, though it will be many weeks before he goes back to school.

Last week, the boy received a visit from former Pittsburgh Steeler Ryan Shazier, who continues his recovery from a spinal cord injury on the field in 2017, to share with Cooper his insights about his path to recovery.

Paridy said what makes the hospital unique is that the team looks at a patient "as a whole person," and the care is tailored to the individual.

"Five years ago, we changed our name from the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago to the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, and we did that very proactively because we realized the rehabilitation is a process, and what our patients really want to focus on is their individual ability."

Cline, who is from Indiana, has been a part of the research hub at Shirley Ryan for some 15 years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, he was coming to the hospital two to three times a month.

He was walking on a treadmill at the hospital this week with the help of an external spinal stimulator, a device that, when connected to a patient, can mimic the brain by telling the spinal cord to tell the legs to walk, said Arun Jayaraman, executive director of Shirley Ryan's technology

innovation hub.

After Cline's spinal cord injury, the signal from his brain that tells his legs to move via the spinal cord was no longer being received, so the external stimulator works to recover the nervous system by acting as a signal, said Jayaraman, who said he sees anywhere from 100 to 200 patients for research a month.

"Phil couldn't walk, and now look at him," he said. "It's incredible. It's a lifelong process, and he continues to work at it and show progression."

Paridy said she believes Shirley Ryan is the only hospital that embeds researchers into clinical care, so that a patient's rehabilitation process is happening in tandem with the most cutting-edge research and technology. Therapeutic intervention is combined with innovative research. Paridy said the hospital has the largest research portfolio for a physical medicine and rehabilitation hospital in the world.

Lemuel Johns, another research patient, said he "always wanted to do everything" on his own and never asked for help because he liked to be independent. But on March 8, 2020, Johns was mugged and shot in the back on the West Side of Chicago, and he suffered a [spinal cord](#) injury that left him unable to walk.

The 41-year-old Chicago resident has progressed over the last over two years and this week was walking with a microprocessor-controlled brace on his left leg that recognizes what he's doing as he moves, whether it be walking or climbing stairs, and bends in a natural motion that lets him walk as if he were uninjured, Jayaraman said. Johns is still training with the brace and learning how to use it but said he is getting better with each visit.

Just six months ago, Johns said, he struggled to make it across a room,

and now he is "doing laps around the place." He said the progress he has made is owed to his team at Shirley Ryan.

"This has humbled me in a lot of ways," he said. "So many people here have helped me get stronger, physically and mentally."

The current Streeterville facility was built in 2017 and has over 260 beds, compared with about 180 at the hospital's previous location, also in Streeterville. The hospital sees about 55,000 to 60,000 patients a year from almost all 50 states and has around 2,400 people on staff, including therapists, nurses, researchers and more.

The facility has over 15 floors dedicated to different abilities, inpatient and outpatient services and more. Some of the ability labs are the "think + speak lab," the "legs + walking lab," and the "strength + endurance lab." Each lab is focused on different sets of abilities, and the floors are split between the inpatient rooms for that lab on one side and the work area on the other. Each lab is set up differently to most effectively help the patients recover that specific ability.

With facilities across Chicago, including DayRehab and outpatient facilities, Shirley Ryan partners with organizations across Illinois, the rest of the country and as far away as the Middle East, Paridy said. She said the hospital had patients from over 70 countries in 2020.

Golden left Shirley Ryan Aug. 19, escorted home by the Chicago Police Department and other law enforcement agencies. He was met with a parade of well-wishers on his way.

His cousin, Gorman, said Golden was "taking it day by day, getting better."

Though Cooper's family said he gets stronger week by week with the

help of the physicians and doctors at the lab, he is in constant pain.

"It is agonizing to see. He still has internal damage—wounds that are slow to heal," his family said.

Cooper's family acknowledged that some wounds need more than cutting-edge technology and world-class health care to heal.

"Most people don't witness the grueling aftermath of surviving these devastating wounds, physical and emotional," the family said. "We are constantly encouraging and motivating Cooper, seeking the positives and hanging on to hope, but we want people to know the unvarnished reality which is his/our new world."

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Citation: Inside Chicago's Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, the world-renowned rehab facility (2022, September 2) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-09-chicago-shirley-ryan-abilitylab-world-renowned.html>

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