



SHANNON CORBEY

INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR
SPINAL CORD INJURY AT KENNEDY
KRIEGER INSTITUTE

HELPING OTHERS

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO MAKE A PROFOUND DIFFERENCE IN
SOMEONE'S LIFE? HOW ABOUT DOING IT EVERY DAY?

We caught up with Shannon Corbey, an occupational therapist at Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore (part of Johns Hopkins) to learn a little more about what occupational therapy is and what it does for people with severe injuries, many of whom have had a complete life change because of their condition.

Shannon, who works with people with severe spinal cord injuries, explained that OT really focuses on everything a patient needs – helping someone become more independent and mobile by helping them do the “little things” we take for granted every day – getting dressed, self-care, even advocating for ourselves. And the approach is to the whole person, always trying to increase the patient's quality of life. So it's mental, social, emotional and physical. A good OT is part physical therapist and part coach.

Here's how Shannon and others at Kennedy Krieger are making a difference – the common, accepted medical opinion used to be that within 3 - 6 months after a spinal cord injury, your physical condition at that time wouldn't change – you were stuck with it. But through high intensity activity based restorative therapy (ABRT), that just isn't the case anymore. Things are getting better.

One of the ways Shannon “gets it” is in her overall approach to her patients, developing a relationship (where they are really like a second family). There are patients, paralyzed from the neck down, who were told they could never hold their head up on their own – that challenge would be more difficult than winning Olympic Gold. And after intensive therapy and hard work, when they can hold their head up on their own for 30 seconds, it's better than winning Olympic Gold.

But Shannon is quick to point out that although she is empathetic and understanding in the face of a completely life changing injury, she is also straightforward and direct. Shannon believes that “every patient has potential” and challenges her patients to make a choice and a commitment to their recovery, like using their wheels now instead of their legs, to gain mobility, independence and even play sports like wheelchair rugby, lacrosse, basketball or racing.

What are the common elements Shannon sees in a successful recovery, even if it is limited by a catastrophic injury? Traits like focus, a positive attitude, and work ethic – as you probably guessed, the same traits Shannon demands of herself.

Shannon, the daughter of former client Bob Corbey and his wife Kelly, became interested in the field because an aunt worked as an occupational therapist helping special needs kids in an early intervention program, so Shannon started volunteering at camps for kids with disabilities. Since then, she has taken advantage of education and opportunities that led to working at a premier institution and here's the important part - helping people who really need her.