

The Piano Man's Amazing Return

Paul Holmes, long-time pianist at the Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club's Fairview Dining Room, remembers December 2006. That's when he fell and sustained career-threatening injuries to his right arm and hand. The journey back hasn't been easy.

Following surgery, Holmes' arm was relegated to a sling. He was incapable of actively moving his shoulder, elbow, hand or fingers. He was told he might never regain full use of his arm, let alone play the piano. Shortly thereafter, Holmes began treatment at Duke Physical Therapy at Patterson Place, an outpatient clinic of the Department of Physical Therapy & Occupational Therapy at Duke Medical Center.

Treatment was frequent, and it was tough. Each week, Holmes had three, one-hour appointments filled with often-painful exercises to restore use to his dislocated shoulder and to heal nerve damage in his hand. "I couldn't drive for five months after the accident," says Holmes. "It was hard to think about anything as wild as playing the piano."

Holmes did regain movement. And then he began to long for the piano and the Fairview. "The therapists at Duke were very enthusiastic about my progress but also very clear: many people who sustain injuries like mine, live out their lives with hands and arms that are useless."

Although he persisted with treatment, there were no guarantees he would be able to resume his career. "As late as December 2007, I was determined yet unsure if I'd be able to return to the piano," he says.

In April 2008, Holmes returned to the Fairview where he performs a vast repertoire of jazz and popular standards. And he's ventured into new territory, arranging a Chopin ballade and a Brahms intermezzo for left-hand only play. He's also mastered a computer-based music notation system that allows him to more easily arrange music and compose.

Physical therapists at Duke are nothing less than amazed. "Witnessing Mr. Holmes' return to the piano is a powerful example of hard work, perseverance and determination," says Greg Ruskan, physical therapist at the Patterson Place clinic. "We take great pride in helping our patients regain

their quality of life following traumatic life-changing events.” This type of recovery is incredible at anyone’s age. Holmes’ age—74 years young—makes it even more amazing.

The road to recovery hasn’t been easy and it isn’t over. Every day, Holmes completes an hour of conditioning exercises with his right hand. “But,” he says, “I’m back in the saddle, and I couldn’t be happier.”

Written by Libbie Hough, communications leader for Op5 Creative, an Atlanta-based marketing communications company.