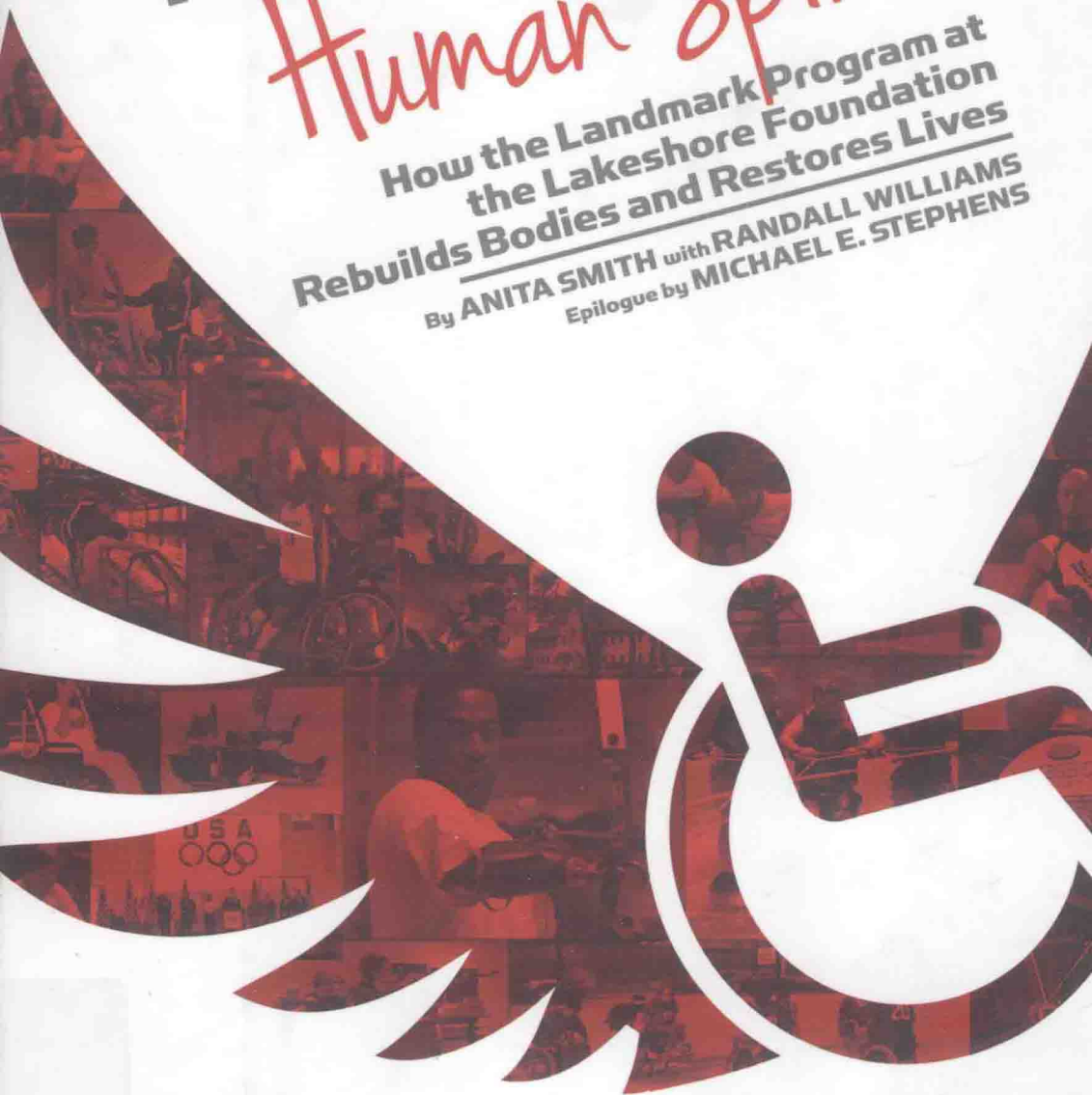


SPORTS REHABILITATION AND THE

Human Spirit

How the Landmark Program at
the Lakeshore Foundation
Rebuilds Bodies and Restores Lives

By ANITA SMITH with RANDALL WILLIAMS
Epilogue by MICHAEL E. STEPHENS



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**SPORTS REHABILITATION
AND THE HUMAN SPIRIT**

"The impeded stream is the one that sings."

— WENDELL BERRY

*To all those who have served,
and will serve, at the Lakeshore Foundation;*

*And to all those who have been served by,
and will be served by, the Lakeshore Foundation;*

All touched by a unique spirit.

Introduction

THE SPIRIT OF LAKESHORE

ANITA SMITH

Mike Stephens and I first came to know one another in the mid-1970s, when he had just been named executive director of Lakeshore Hospital and I was a medical reporter for the *Birmingham News*.

This was an exciting time for Lakeshore, early in its transition from a longtime tuberculosis sanatorium into a rehabilitation campus with facilities and programs to aid those with physical disabilities.

Through the years I wrote a lot about Lakeshore. Then, after I left the newspaper business to do other types of writing, I told Mike that if he ever decided to participate in a book about Lakeshore, I would love to work with him on it. Having seen so many lives enhanced, even transformed, on its campus, I thought of the Lakeshore Rehabilitation Complex as a magical place.

During the years when I was beginning my new career of writing books, the Lakeshore story was mushrooming in scope and impact. I was aware that Mike was at the helm of major mid-1980s initiatives that drove Lakeshore forward by leaps and bounds. Mike became the founder of the Lakeshore Foundation, which was given the mission of providing prototype sports, recreation, and fitness programs for those with physical disabilities. Mike also founded and led a multistate rehabilitation company, ReLife, Inc.—with Lakeshore Hospital as its flagship facility (there were many other ReLife facilities).

So it was that the time eventually came when Mike was ready for a book about Lakeshore. By then he was not involved in day-to-day

operations of either a rehabilitation company or the Lakeshore campus. However, he was still very supportive of Lakeshore and still served on the Foundation's board of directors.

Mike told me that he knew the time had come to do a Lakeshore book when he observed a touching scene that brought home how the Lakeshore Foundation was helping physically disabled individuals assimilate into mainstream life and interact comfortably with the able-bodied. He told me: "There was this little boy in a wheelchair—around five years old. He was having the best time that day participating in events in the Foundation's fieldhouse. And alongside him was his able-bodied brother, a few years older, who also was participating and having fun. It was all so natural. Through Lakeshore's sports and recreation programs, the boy with a physical disability had found his comfort zone. And his able-bodied brother also felt at home. Anita, that's what it's all about—helping one person at a time, but also helping society to bridge gaps between the physically disabled and the able-bodied."

OLD HABITS ARE hard to break. The first 20 years of my writing career were spent as a newspaperwoman facing deadline after deadline.

By the time Mike and I started work on the Lakeshore book, I had been out of the newspaper business for another 20 years and had written several books. The books were nonfiction, heavy on research and interviews, and they tended to take a long time. But still there were occasions when I felt the sudden need to rush toward a deadline—just as I had done during my newspaper days—even if there wasn't one.

Mike and I had been working on the Lakeshore project for a few months. He was providing me with extensive background and was guiding me as I conducted initial interviews and research.

One afternoon after I had completed some interviews with individuals who had been helped by Lakeshore, I felt that deadline intensity, that it was time to start writing. I said so to Mike.

He was appalled. He knew that I had learned a lot about Lakeshore. However, he also knew that there was a lot—particularly relevant to the broader, developing Lakeshore story of recent years—that I *did*

not yet know. Also, there was something else about my rushing that bothered Mike badly. He believed, rightfully so, that what I needed to understand were not just the *facts* of this Lakeshore story, but also *the feelings, the spirit*.

He was right.

Mike himself had incurred a severe physical disability while in his mid-twenties; by the time we started working on this book, he had been dealing with the aftermath for three and a half decades. Through his firsthand experience Mike had gained painful insights into the feelings, the hardships, the obstacles, the needs, and, oh yes, the *positive potential* of individuals with physical disabilities. Mike's insights had given him a special edge in guiding Lakeshore to lend life-changing helping hands to so many.

Since Mike had actually *lived* the story of one with a physical disability, and continued to live such a story, he knew that the stories of those I was interviewing were deep and complex—requiring my taking time, care, and reflection.

He said in no uncertain terms that I couldn't possibly understand enough yet to start writing. He said that I had to slow down and take the time to really *feel* the spirit of Lakeshore. He reminded me that we weren't on a newspaper deadline.

I realized that he was right again, for I had conducted just enough Lakeshore-related interviews to skim the surface and to tug at my soul just enough to know there was much more to learn and feel. If you're interviewing someone left paralyzed for life by an auto accident, or someone who has grave disabilities due to a birth defect, skimming the surface is *not* enough.

When I arrived home that evening, I shared the conversation with my husband, Jim Lunsford. I wasn't just seeking Jim's personal opinion; I also was seeking his professional opinion, for Jim had spent several years in the business of publishing and distributing books. Jim listened objectively, not like listening to the woman he loved, but like listening to an author. "Anita, Mike is right," Jim said. "This book project will greatly benefit from the meeting you and Mike had today."

I agreed. And now, several years down the road, I agree even more. This book took a long time to develop. But we kept working month after month and year after year, and I can now look back at that particular day as the beginning of my really getting to know the *spirit* of Lakeshore.

THIS BOOK TELLS the stories of how individuals with physical disabilities have been helped, and continue to be helped, by two very different types of therapies. It tells about the more conventional rehabilitation therapies that have been provided at Lakeshore Hospital. And it tells about the incredible boosts to quality of life that the Lakeshore Foundation provides with sports, recreation, and fitness programs tailored for those with physical disabilities.

The internationally known Lakeshore Foundation and those served by it occupy the primary spotlight in this book. This is a foundation that is affiliated with the U.S. Olympics/Paralympics as an official training site. It is a foundation that is home base for far-reaching programs of sports, recreation, and fitness tailored for military personnel with physical disabilities, many of whom have been injured in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the book serves a purpose beyond Lakeshore and beyond Lakeshore's staff and client family, because the innovations and practices at Lakeshore draw from the steady advances that have been made in recent years in rehabilitation, recreation, sports, and fitness for the physically disabled. Mike Stephens and Lakeshore have been a leader in these advances, but they have also closely watched and learned from advances at other facilities. Thus this book will have usefulness and meaning to those similarly engaged in these programs at facilities around the world. Likewise, the stories of the remarkable individuals told in these pages will be inspiring to both the physically disabled and the able-bodied whoever and wherever they are, even if they have no direct connection to Lakeshore.

We haven't written a history book in the traditional sense. There are no references, footnotes, or appendices. Although the stories in the book are all true, we wanted the book to read more like a novel. That's

only fitting, since the characters in this book have faced and dealt with obstacles that often seem beyond ordinary life.

The goal of this book is not just to let you see some of what has taken place and continues to take place at Lakeshore, but also to afford you a glimpse of the spirit that drives the process and the incredible successes. So many people I have interviewed for this book have commented on the Lakeshore spirit. Dr. Russ Fine, who at the time of his interview was director of the Injury Control Research Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), told me: “Lakeshore, I believe, became as much an *attitude* as a *place*.”

In casting a spotlight on that driving spirit, on that “attitude,” the book dwells not so much on *institutions* as it does on *people* whose lives have been transformed with the help of these institutions. Along the way are stories of some individuals whose courage and accomplishments have made my heart soar. I hope you have the same experience.

THE CONVERSATION WITH Mike Stephens that I have already mentioned was tense, but it was not out of character.

More than 30 years ago, when I was writing newspaper stories about Lakeshore in its early days as a rehabilitation campus, I had another tense discussion with him. I was trying to convince Mike that he should *tell his own story*—so the public could see why he felt so passionately about Lakeshore’s mission, *and* so the public would want to join him in supporting that mission.

Mike is a very private person. It did not come naturally to him to bare his soul and talk publicly about his own physical disability and how his experience ultimately inspired him to help others. Still, Mike reluctantly came to the conclusion that he would tell his own story. He said that, after thinking about it, he could see how it could help Lakeshore if people could see *why* he felt so strongly that Lakeshore’s mission was so vital. So I wrote a newspaper story about Mike’s personal journey.

Then, when we started working on this Lakeshore book, I insisted that Mike tell his story in even more excruciating detail. I can tell you it was difficult, very emotionally painful, for him to relive those

memories. But he did. As you will see, that's how this book begins—with Mike's story.

In my view, the entire book benefits from the fact that it was told through the eyes and guidance of Lakeshore Foundation founder Mike Stephens—not only his own story, but also how he has viewed the stories of many others who have been touched and helped by Lakeshore.

IT MIGHT BE understandable for someone to pick up this book and say, “Oh, this is great. This is a book meant to inspire individuals who have physical disabilities.” Well, it is that. But we hope it is much more than that. We wanted this to be a book that can inspire people no matter what kinds of crises, obstacles, and/or losses they are facing.

In the process of researching and writing the book, what I learned from the individuals on these pages helped me to weather the single most devastating event that has ever occurred in my own life—the unexpected death of my husband Jim, in February 2008.

After Jim died, there were those who knew how close we were, who knew our love story, who in one way or another would say to me, “Anita, you are coping and going forward. Who is your therapist?” I could easily answer: “Lakeshore and its people and its *spirit* are my therapists—every day. If the people I have met at Lakeshore can go forward and cope, in many cases achieve at very high levels, after the ordeals they have endured, I can use them as my inspiration, indeed as my compass.”

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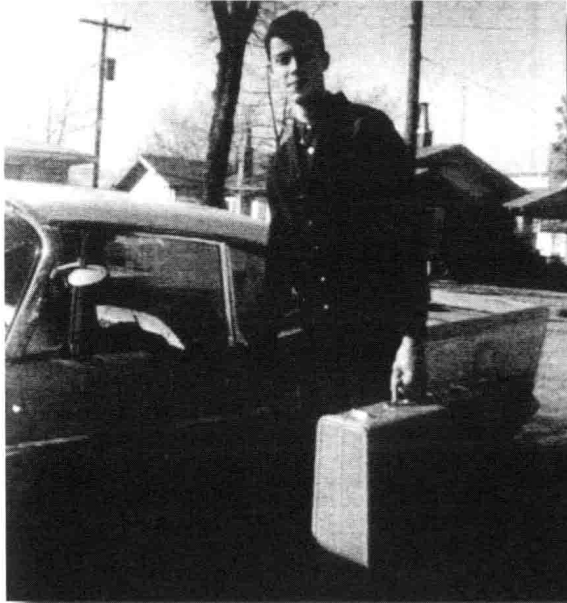
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PART I

*The Journey
of
Michael Stephens*



A young Mike Stephens before his injury, at the beginning of one part of his life journey.

FATEFUL SUNDAY

Mike and Susan Stephens had enjoyed a leisurely lunch on a Sunday afternoon in 1970 at the Cliff Terrace apartment of friends Larry and Linda Sinquefield in Birmingham, Alabama. The couples had eaten shish kebabs and sat around talking. They had planned a swim in the apartment complex pool, but time had gotten away. A salesman, Mike was starting a road trip the next morning and he had prep work to do before bedtime.

"Susan and I have to go, Larry," Mike said. "I need an early start tomorrow."

Fun-loving Larry protested, "Come on, let's at least jump in the pool and get wet."

Mike gave in and off they went. The wives continued visiting in the apartment.

Mike Stephens was an athletic and fit 26-year-old. He was a strong and experienced swimmer. When his legs flexed that afternoon on the concrete curbing of the Cliff Terrace pool and arched his body into the water, it was a dive like any of the thousands he had made before.

Maybe he slipped. Maybe the pool was shallower than he realized. At any rate, he dove so deeply that his head hit on the pool's hard bottom and bent so far forward that his chin touched his chest.

He never lost consciousness. But all his strength and swimming skill were now irrelevant. Somehow he kept air in his lungs. Miraculously, he floated to the surface. But all sensation and motion were gone from his body.

I can't move. My arms won't move. My legs won't move. I can't move my body.

He called out for his friend, who had just dived into the pool with