Anna Faura is positively excited. It's a Thursday at Good Shepherd's south All Hallows for the pretty and energetic girl on the verge of becoming a confident walker. She has cerebral palsy and for the first time in her life, Anna is experiencing the thrill of walking without relying on her walker. The world seems to be opening up to her. "She has some girl-power at what you want her to have," says Anna's mother, Melissa, who is elated at her daughter's progress. "I consider the ZeroG a breakthrough in technology, so innovative. She's just blossoming." "Little did I know then that..." Melissa first became acquainted with Good Shepherd in the 1990s when, as a dietitian in the rehabilitation program, then again some years later, as the program manager."
Anna Faura is positively giddy with excitement. It's a Thursday afternoon at the Dornsife Pediatric Therapy Suite on Good Shepherd's south Allentown campus and for the pretty and energetic 12-year-old, that means one-on-one time with the ZeroG, a gait and balance system that brings life-changing technology to children like Anna.

For Anna, who has cerebral palsy, this is one of the best days of the week because for the first time in her life, Anna is walking as she's never done before, experiencing mobility without relying on her walker. Suddenly, the world seems to hold greater possibilities for a girl on the verge of becoming a teenager, who is yearning for more independence and literally is making strides to achieve that goal.

“She has some girl-power attitude and that's what you want her to have, independence and a high functioning level despite her disabilities,” says Anna's mother, Melissa, marveling at her daughter's enthusiasm and progress. “I consider the ZeroG state of the art and so innovative. She's just blossomed since doing this.”

That Anna is able to keep her sense of delight is all the more remarkable for a young girl who had to learn to walk not once but twice. Melissa and Anna's father, Xavier, know that beyond the uncertainties Anna will face as she grows older, two things have been a reassuring constant in their lives. Good Shepherd and a daughter who is their “angel on earth,” bringing them light and love and joy.

Melissa first became acquainted with Good Shepherd in the 1990s when she worked there as a dietitian in the rehabilitation hospital and then again some years later as a clinical nutrition manager.

“She almost died,” says Melissa. “We had her baptized three days after being born.”

Finally Anna stabilized enough to go home but there were more struggles ahead. It took two months to finally get the seizures under control and as time passed, other problems became apparent. Anna wasn’t reaching the normal developmental milestones. She was non-verbal, she couldn’t sit up on her own when she was 10 months old and she didn’t start to crawl until she reached 18 months.

Melissa also noticed that Anna wasn’t reacting to light and movement. “You could pass by her and she wasn’t tracking,” says Melissa. A specialist determined when Anna was two months old that she had cortical visual...
impairment, a disconnect between what she saw and what her brain was able to process. “It was like an uphill climb of Mt. Everest because it was one obstacle after another,” says Melissa.

The cerebral palsy diagnosis came when Anna was a year old. Immediately Melissa and Xavier began exploring therapies that would help their daughter be the best she could possibly be. They had plenty to work with. “She was the most loving and happy child,” says Melissa. “She was able to adjust to anyone who picked her up, she didn’t cry much and she was comforted easily.”

At two, Anna began physical therapy at Good Shepherd’s outpatient pediatrics program through early intervention. A year later, occupational and speech therapies were added. Having worked for Good Shepherd years before and

witnessed some powerful recoveries with neurologically impaired patients, Melissa knew that if her daughter was to thrive, Good Shepherd offered the best chance.

“I loved the interdisciplinary approach to improving patient outcomes,” says Melissa. “It was just incredible for me to see how the team worked together. It was so worth coming to work every day.”

As Anna grew, the need for orthopedic surgery became more apparent. In 2013, Anna’s femurs were fractured and rotated then realigned on her hips with plates and screws to prevent her legs from turning inward. Anna was admitted to the Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Hospital Emily Howatt Piskatt Pediatric Unit in Bethlehem where she had to learn to walk all over again.

When Anna arrived, she could only stand for 15 seconds. After two and a half months, with leg braces and a walker, she walked out.

“What a joy that was,” says Melissa. “I thought she was never going to walk again but she showed us that with her spirit and sense of hard work and determination that she could do it. She’s teaching us every day.”

Melissa credits much of Anna’s recovery with the excellent teamwork between Good Shepherd’s outpatient and inpatient therapists. “Within a very short period of time, they knew exactly what to do with Anna,” says Melissa. “The care was seamless.”

Once again, Anna resumed physical therapy. When the RJ Foundation provided funding for purchase Anna’s physical therapist, Amanda began evaluating Anna as a candidate. A harness fastened to helps support Anna’s body as she walks without holding on and giving her a sense of independence.

“She needed to work on her balance and I liked the ZeroG because it decreases her fear of falling since it catches her,” says Amanda. “Anna now is getting more mobility outside of her walker and her gait pattern is improving because she’s taking longer steps and has less hip rotation.”

Amanda also uses a treadmill in Anna’s sessions with the ZeroG to help her progress even more. “She can get 1000 steps in a short amount of time by going faster on the treadmill,” says Amanda. “The repetition helps with neuroplasticity, retrains the muscles and nerves.”

Whatever nervousness Anna had during her first session the ZeroG was gone by the session. Fear gave way to freedom and that has become evident at home where Anna’s watchful eye of her brother now can walk through the hallway on her own and get up and down the stairs with grace before she began using

“I’m inspired by how she’s able to do stuff and when I’m having a hard day, I think of her.” — Juan, Anna’s brother
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Anna’s physical therapist, Amanda Kleckner,
began evaluating Anna as a possible can-
date. A harness fastened to an overhead track
helps support Anna’s body weight allowing
her to walk without holding on to anything
and giving her a sense of greater indepen-
dence.

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vident at home where Anna, under the
watchful eye of her brother, Juan, and par-
ents, now can walk through the downstairs
hallway on her own and delights in climbing
up and down the stairs with more confidence
than before she began using the ZeroG.

“If I go to hold her waist, she’ll move my hand
off her waist as if to say, ‘Mom. I’ve got this,”
says Melissa.

Excursions to the park near their home bring
out even more of Anna’s hunger for indepen-
dence. Melissa and Xavier
beam when they watch
how much faster Anna
oves using her walker
as she makes a beeline for
the park. Watching their
daughter’s confidence
bloom exceeds what these
devoted parents ever
imagined.

“I think our hopes for her
in the beginning were not
hat great,” says Xavier.
“But after the surgery and
he ZeroG, she’s just happy and as a parent,
that’s all you want for your child.”

Adds Melissa, “Good Shepherd is a blessing to
our family. The therapists are highly dedi-
cated to improving our daughter’s functional
abilities and it’s providing her with the latest
technology to advance her. When she’s doing
the ZeroG, she’s just happy and as a parent,
that’s all you want for your child.”