

# Injured teen lauds Shriners as local community fights hospital's potential closure

## Calls blend of physical therapy, prosthetics unique

By CATHERINE BAUM  
Staff Writer



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NORTHAMPTON - For five months now, Clara Gardner, a Northampton High School senior, has worked out twice a week in grueling sessions. She completes obstacle courses, uses a Pilates machine and repeatedly walks up and down sets of stairways.

That might not sound like much for a vital and vivacious 17-year-old, but Gardner is in rehab after a car crash eight months ago that led to the loss of both her legs above the knees.

She has been working with the Shriners Hospital physical therapy department with two physical therapists, a doctor and prosthetist, all of whom are committed to get her to walk, drive and participate in sports like adaptive rowing.

Gardner said she's "never been in such good shape," as her arms, thighs and core endure tough workouts while using her wheelchair and the prostheses made for her at the Springfield Shriners Hospital for Children.

"I didn't know about it and I didn't appreciate it before my accident, but now that this has happened to me they've helped me so much," Gardner of the hospital. She was injured when a driver police say was drunk hit her as she was loading her luggage in a van at the Amtrak train station in Springfield last summer.

Now, Gardner is one of approximately 20,000 patients facing implications of the hospital's potential closing. And so, in addition to fighting hard for her recovery, she's also fighting for the hospital's survival.

If the hospital closes, Gardner said, "I really don't know what's going to happen."

"There's not really anywhere else around here that offers physical therapy and the making of the prosthetics together in the same way Shriners does," she said.

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The hospital provides specialized orthopedic care at no cost to patients or their families. It is one of six hospitals the Shriners' board of trustees is considering closing to cut costs. The others are in Greenville, S.C.; Shreveport, La.; Erie, Pa.; Spokane, Wash.; and Galveston, Texas, where the hospital has been temporarily closed due to damages brought on by Hurricane Ike.

Of the 22 Shriners hospitals in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, the Springfield hospital has the second largest number of outpatients. But only 20 of the hospital's 40 beds are occupied, defining the hospital as one of the most underused in the Shriners network. The Shriners hospital closest to Springfield that specializes in orthopedic care is in Philadelphia.

While donations have leveled off, hospital officials say the number of patients and the cost of care has increased, forcing the nonprofit to pull about \$1 million a day from its endowment since 2001. All 22 hospitals would have to close in five years if the organization continues to operate this way, a Shriners spokesman said.

Phil Thomas, chairman of the Springfield hospital's board of governors, is one of about 1,200 representatives who will vote on the fate of the six hospitals at the Shriners' 135th Imperial Council Session in San Antonio in July.

"We have created an alternate plan" to closing the hospital, Thomas said, speaking on behalf of the local hospital's board. He declined to comment further on that plan, but noted the council in July will consider accepting third-party pay, closing the six hospitals or decreasing the budgets of all 22 hospitals.

"Those are some of the options on the floor right now, but those could all change between now and July," he said.

The Springfield hospital board of governors is in communication with the Connecticut Children's Medical Center and Baystate Medical Center about potential partnerships, he added.

Kate O'Kane, Gardner's mother, wrote a letter to the Shriners board of trustees asking the board to accept health insurance payments as a means to keep the local facility open. She said most of her daughter's care would be covered by dual health insurance.

"The free care is not why we chose Shriners," O'Kane said. "It was the fact that they had a lot of experience working with bilateral amputees and they have all the providers under one roof. It's proved invaluable many times."

Gardner said her ultimate goal is to get out of her wheelchair and use her prostheses most of the time, but she can't predict when that will happen.

"You take steps forward you take steps backward," she said. "Things speed up and then they slow down."

Meanwhile, Gardner accepts piggy-back rides up and down stairs from friends, takes longer routes during visits to college campuses to find accessible doors, and fixes her wheelchair when it gets stuck on curb cuts in downtown Northampton.

"So much has changed for her," O'Kane said. She noted Gardner has applied and been accepted to colleges, but hasn't yet made a decision for next year.

"She's plunging ahead and trying not to let this dominate her life, but of course it plays a pretty big part."

O'Kane is joined by many in the push for Shriners Hospitals to accept third-party payment. Thomas said most of the patient families with insurance have questioned why the hospital doesn't use it.

"They say, 'we pay good money for it, why not take it,'" he said. "But our bylaws don't allow it."

The council voted on and rejected third-party payment about five years ago, he noted.

"I think this time around it may be different because of financial issues," he said.

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