

Former Atrium Health Floyd patient now inspiring others

Austin Sisk is one of four Good Samaritan Volunteer of the Year recipients

ROME, GA., April 27, 2026 — When Austin Sisk received the Atrium Health Floyd Good Samaritan Volunteer of the Year Award April 27, those who know his journey knew they were witnessing a truly special moment.

Five months after graduating high school in 2022, Sisk's truck was struck broadside by another vehicle. The impact tore his brain in four places, leaving the 18-year-old comatose with a ventilator breathing for him. The trauma and intensive care teams caring for him at Atrium Health Floyd Medical Center told his parents their son faced an uncertain future.

His mother, Andrea, said the weeks following the wreck were a series of "just-in-time" miracles, with Sisk demonstrating last-minute improvements time and again to qualify him for a new level of care. After three weeks in the Intensive Care Unit at Atrium Health Floyd Medical Center, Sisk was transferred to a long-term rehabilitation facility in Chattanooga. Emerging from his coma eight weeks after the wreck, Sisk improved again, qualifying him for Atlanta's Shepherd Center, which specializes in spinal cord, brain injuries and other complex neurological conditions.

Six months after his wreck, Sisk, who also has Marfan Syndrome, came home and became a patient of Atrium Health Floyd Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation, receiving physical, occupational and speech therapy. Over the next two years, Sisk steadily improved.

"Austin came to us as a 19-year-old kid with the odds stacked against him. He kind of started at the bottom," Atrium Health Floyd speech pathologist Danielle Salerno said. "To see his journey from the beginning to now, to watch him grow through all of therapies and now furthering himself after such a traumatic brain injury has been incredible. He is the pillar of what we want to see from our patients."

"He shows what dedication, hard work and perseverance can do when you put in the time and the work," said Misty Copeland, Atrium Health Floyd occupational therapist.

After two years of therapy, Sisk, who had been self-sufficient before his wreck, had regained the ability to walk and speak, and he was ready to move to a new stage of life.

"His dream was to be a physical therapy assistant," Andrea Sisk said, "and he gave it his all, his 100 percent, but with his disability, it's not something that worked out for him."

But that didn't stop Sisk. If his limitations prevented him from working, he asked if he could volunteer at the Atrium Health Floyd Physical Therapy and Rehab gym where he had received treatment. The reply was an emphatic, "Yes!"

His former therapists say Sisk is more than a volunteer.

"He comes and helps clean things up and put things away," said Atrium Health Floyd occupational therapist Alyssa Luthi. "And before he leaves for the day, he checks to see if anyone needs anything before he goes. He's always thinking about helping other people."

Sisk has the ability to empathize and motivate patients in a way that even their therapists cannot, she said.

“When we have other patients who are depressed or getting down about their progress at the moment, Austin is great to go and talk to them, give them an encouraging word and spark that motivation to keep going and keep fighting,” Luthi said.

“I appreciate that he’s here and can relate to our new patients, encourage them and show them, ‘Yes, I have been in your shoes,’” Copeland said. “We can talk to them and tell them, but we haven’t been there like Austin has. He can talk to them one on one and show them there is life after a traumatic brain injury.

“We have another young gentleman patient, about the same age. He said his goal is to be like Austin. If you are going to pick somebody to be like, you can’t go wrong with picking Austin. He is truly an amazing human being.”

Awarding Sisk with Good Samaritan recognition is “a full-circle moment for him,” Salerno said.

“It just brings us so much joy to see him volunteer, because at the end of the day, this is what we do — help our patients to improve and live their best possible life. He is the pillar of what we want to see from our patients.”

“Austin chose to return not just as a survivor, but as a source of strength and encouragement for others,” said Carolyn Falcitelli, director of Volunteer Services at Atrium Health Floyd. “He brings a perspective that can’t be taught — one rooted in lived experience, and it shows in the way he connects with patients who feel stuck, discouraged or ready to give up. Austin meets them where they are, offering genuine support and motivation because he’s been there himself.

“He stands as a living reminder that persistence is the path to success and that recovery is possible, even on the hardest days. It is no surprise that Austin has been selected as one of our Good Samaritans of the Year. His compassion, resilience and ability to inspire others have elevated the rehab experience in a truly meaningful way.”

Sisk joins three other volunteers as 2026 Good Samaritans of the Year:

- Christine Barham, a volunteer at Cherokee Medical Center, who brings her therapy dogs, Chipper and Rosie to visit patients there.
- Garry Fisher, a cancer survivor and volunteer with Cancer Navigators and the Harbin Clinic Cancer Center.
- Wanda Hilyer, a volunteer at the Polk Medical Center gift shop.