

Wynne Leon (00:02)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that takes a deep dive into collaboration.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, Vicki Atkinson and I are with author, powerhouse and president of Walking with Anthony, Micki Purcell. Micki tells of the diving accident 15 years ago that resulted in her son Anthony's spinal cord injury. It was the beginning of their journey into understanding the physical, mental and financial challenges that come with spinal cord injuries, as well as their wholehearted advocacy.

for anyone with a spinal cord injury. Walking with Anthony is the go-to organization to help individuals and families who are forever changed by this type of injury. Micki talks about how they make a difference with a personal touch and recovery through rehab. She tells us how Anthony is doing now, and we get to hear heartwarming stories about how all of their large family is involved with Walking with Anthony.

Micki's hands-on advocacy will grip and delight you. Micki tells us about their stand-up for a cause event in Newport Beach on October 24th. The event will honor courageous medical staff doing incredible spinal cord injury work and Tony Award-winning actress, Ali Stoker. September is Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Month and 2025 marks the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disability Act.

Vicki and I are so grateful to be able to bring you this episode to honor both. This is a powerful episode that will inspire and touch you. We know you'll love it.

Micki Purcell (01:57)

you

you

Micki?

Wynne Leon (02:11)

Hello, it's so good to be with you. You have such a powerful story and you impact so many lives with your Walking with Anthony foundation.

Micki Purcell (02:22)

Thank you, and I'm excited to be here today with you guys. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (02:25)

Your son Anthony was injured 15 years ago. Can you tell us that story?

Micki Purcell (02:32)

Yeah, Anthony was in Miami at the Super Bowl with a bunch of his friends. and he was staying at the Shore Club in South beach and he decided to take a swim in the ocean and he ran in, dove in and hit a sandbar. Luckily his cousin was standing there watching him. and as he was floating, he thought it was a joke. Then he realized, Hey, this kid's hurt. He ran in and picked him up and saved his life. And, he was rushed to Jackson Memorial and he.

had a spinal cord injury and our lives changed in a split of a

Wynne Leon (03:07)

Right? And he didn't live in Miami. He was just visiting.

Micki Purcell (03:10)

No, he lived in Fort Lauderdale. Okay. Yeah. He lived in Fort Lauderdale and I was in California at the time and I flew right away to Miami, ~ turned my car around on the 4- 0- 5 heading to the golf tournament. luckily got on the plane and got there in time for him to open his eyes and see that I was there. So I, I was at his side for seven years. I didn't leave it. did everything I could to get him back.

And luckily after a long time of rehab, stem cell, he is now had a baby, he's married, he's running a company, he's driving, he's, got his life back. You can't put a price on that. Six months into his injury, I realized that people needed help. I'm a very strong person. I put my mind on something. I get things done. When I was in rehab, I saw that these parents were fragile. They didn't know what to do.

Insurance does not cover this horrific injury. You're thrown to the curb in 21 days. So they didn't know what to do. I decided to start Walking with Anthony for two reasons. One, I knew these people needed help and I knew I could probably bring help to them. Number two, my son was on suicide sites and I knew I had to get his brain on something else besides killing himself. So I decided to start this charity. Didn't know anything about a charity, a 501 3C knew nothing. I just

Hired an attorney, papered it up, and the rest is history. I've taken baby steps. I started having events throughout the country, helping people, researching, finding out the best rehabs, where to get the best equipment, where to get the best caregivers. So if anyone gets hurt in the country, whether it's Seattle, Washington, or whether it's New York City, I know where to send them. I know what is the best rehabs.

It's sad that rehab is not covered. It's \$125 an hour. It's very expensive, but I know where to send them. Not only do we know where to send these people and help them, we mentor them. It's a very tragic accident. It affects everyone in the family. Everyone's life changes. It's just horrific. And it's sad that it's such an expensive recovery and insurance doesn't cover it.

Walking with Anthony has become the 911 charity. Christopher Reeve Foundation and Miami Project raised millions for research. If somebody gets hurt out there, we are the ones they call now. We get 30 applications a month. We used to go two a month. We are known out there. If we can't help you, I'll mentor you. There's Seal Beach, lifeguard, 20 years old, dove in the ocean a month ago, paralyzed. I just physically met with his parents.

I'm steering them how to go, where to go, what to do, how to do it. They are lucky that they do have the money to get their son back, but they don't know what to do. Most people don't have the money, but it's just we're helping as many people as we can.

Vicki Atkinson (06:09)

But I that's what sets you apart and what you and Anthony are doing because it's just very clear. It's personal, it's thoughtful. We're going to fill the gaps. We're going to spend the time with you to

hear the stories, to hear the vulnerability. It's so, so personal. And it's clear that that was given you purpose, but more importantly, it gave Anthony purpose.

Micki Purcell (06:34)

Anthony is so involved in this charity. Now, when I first told him we're going to start a charity, he, I don't want to tell you what he said. He thought I was nuts. He is so involved and he mentors. He talks people out of suicide. Like this lifeguard he's going to talk to this week. he's in Colorado at a great hospital, Craig's hospital in Colorado, but Anthony is very involved. And I think he's a better person today than he was this really, turned into very positive.

for our entire family. My family is close knit. have 10 brothers and sisters, 46 nieces and nephews. Everybody's involved in this. ~ he was lucky he had the support system he had. A lot of people get hurt. They're alone. They're lonely. They don't know what to do. So mean, Anthony, I tell him every day, you're one of the lucky ones that got hurt. ~ It's not easy for him. He wrote me a letter the other day explaining everything he goes to on a daily basis, because I kind of forgot.

and he makes it look easy. But if you read this letter, you would understand the struggles that they go through, everybody, from every organ their body is affected, not only physically, mentally, but their organs. So it's a tough injury, very tough.

Wynne Leon (07:45)

Well, your focus is on helping people with spinal cord injuries move forward and redefining what recovery from a spinal cord injury looks like. Can you explain some of those issues and progress that affect spinal cord injury patients?

Micki Purcell (08:04)

Once you get out of the hospital, ICU, you typically will go into the rehab center at the hospital, outpatient. And they teach you basic ways to get around. But what they need is they need rehab from a facility that specializes in spinal cord that's more aggressive, that really understands the spine, the injury, and it's...

a long process, but there's light at the end of the tunnel. You can get stronger, you can get healthier, you can get more independent. At our event this year, I have a gentleman who was hurt very badly. He's a C4 -5 and I sent him to a wonderful rehab center, and he's gonna be walking across the stage. Wow. You're gonna see a video of him in ICU and all the baby steps and everything he went through to get where he is today.

~ The one thing you need mentally is you need the desire to get better. You got to have that desire to get in there, get stronger, healthier, better every day. Like Anthony would explain to people, look, little baby steps. When he was able to hold a drink in his hand, we cheered. When he took the razor for the first time in his hand, when he, mean, little teeny steps, it's not going to happen overnight. This injury takes a long time for recovery. But if you have the patience,

and the willing and the desire to get better, you will get better. And what really upsets me that the medical society has really turned against spinal cord injury. If you break your back, they cover everything. If you have a spinal cord injury, after 21 days, typically you're told your insurance has

run out. When I was at Jackson Memorial Hospital, 21 days after his injury, they tapped me on the shoulder and said, tomorrow's your last day.

I was shocked. There was nobody who warned me that this was gonna happen. Literally we rolled Anthony to the curb and there I was. I went home, I didn't know what I was gonna do. It was crazy, but I got on the phone. I found a great rehab center in California in Carlsbad. Found out that they were the best. Got the owner on the phone. They said there was a year waiting list and that changed over the phone. we flew there in two days. Not only did we get in, thank God, but he trained him. He was the trainer.

But we ended up joining hands with them, walk with Anthony. We brought a lot of people to Project Walk. They're no longer in existence. then we went to different rehab centers, but it costs a lot of money. You need at least three days, three hours a day at 150 an hour. It costs a lot of money. And that's why, you you see, you saw the video of us giving out grants to these people and their reactions. I mean, they're just, it's like, you can't put a price to help somebody. And what we do,

We give the grants and then we want them to learn like Anthony has a whole garage now of workout. He knows how to roll up, do things himself, workout, lift, and he learns what he needs. Stand up machine. It's \$21,000. Insurance doesn't cover it, but he stands every day. You have to get the blood flowing to your feet. You got to stand. ~ FES bike that stimulates your legs. There's so many wonderful equipment out there, but it's just not affordable to the average person. But it's a long process, but

You see, I could tell you stories of people who got hurt and how wonderful they're doing today. So there is light at the end of the tunnel, but we need money. We need money. And if we had the money to help every person, everything would change, but we don't have it. So like this gala, we're hoping that we make at least a million dollars. If we do, we can help 200 people get their first grant and off the ground.

530 people in our database waiting for help.

Vicki Atkinson (12:02)

And this is the October 24th event. You're talking about this coming up next month. Well, Nikki, the thing that I think is that just distinguishes what you do and I see your drive and purpose, you know, and all over it and your beautiful book. But at the same time that you're helping financially, you're listening to the stories, you're giving hope even before the money has changed hands. There's such a heartfelt, we're with you.

You and Anthony have a large family. think a lot of families that feel isolated and then on top of it, not having the resources and the access to care and all of that, that debilitating on top of everything else, feeling that the hopelessness, but you take care of that too. You bring the smiles, you bring the positivity, you can't make the hardships go away or change the events that have.

created, you know, the injury, but you do almost everything you can.

Micki Purcell (13:03)

We do everything we can.

I could tell you story after story after story. mean, I'm on the phone every day talking to someone's parents or sister or brother who got hurt. I was in a restaurant the other night and a guy rolled in in his power wheelchair with three people and they went to eat and I saw the caregiver feeding him and I always go up to anybody in a wheelchair and I was, what happened? How did it happen? How do you do it? It's just my natural instinct.

So I waited for them to finish dinner when he that when they were leaving, I went outside and I said, Hey, I'm Micki Purcell with Walking with Anthony. You don't know me, but you know, I gave him a hug. said, what happened? He goes, I got shot. And I said, Oh my God, to make a long story short, I had him crying. And then I had him smiling. I invited him to my event. He's coming. His family's coming. They're going to see people in his position, where they are today, how they started. This is going to be the most inspirational night.

that he has experienced since he got hurt and I'm gonna change his life. And I told him, said, this was your lucky night. You're lucky you came to this restaurant. So I, you know, but I gave him hope. I gave him inspiration. that's who we are.

Wynne Leon (14:18)

Yeah.

Vicki Atkinson (14:19)

But you're

also fearless because you're not afraid to walk up to someone you don't know and go, I see you and I want to know your story. And I think that it's a powerful, important thing. But I mean, you're a warrior.

Micki Purcell (14:37)

It's very powerful. see, we honored the CEO of the Christopher Reeve Foundation of 17 years. And it's just very inspirational. And I'm excited for you to see what kind of event we put on. But I'm excited. We have a lot of people coming that we've helped in wheelchairs. And we really put on an inspirational evening that

no one will ever forget. ~

Wynne Leon (15:01)

So, but you've said also that mentoring has helped your family and helped redefine not only, I think, Anthony's purposes, but your own and.

Micki Purcell (15:13)

I have all my family, I send them all the information, they all stay on top. Just to give you an example, my granddaughter is 16 years old. She's a senior in high school. And she was one year old when Anthony got hurt. She wrote a paper for her high school homework about Walking with Anthony and I cried for an hour What this girl.

Vicki Atkinson (15:30)

Right, yeah.

Micki Purcell (15:41)

picked up over the years. she goes, I'm a warrior walking with Anthony. ~ As a matter of fact, I'm going to read it at the event. I forgot about, but it is so unbelievable that this, what she talked about the years through, I, you know, and then I have pictures and videos of her hanging onto the back of his wheelchair. But I mean, it's amazing. And our whole family is connected. look.

At least once every quarter, somebody in my family finds out about a spinal cord victim and says, hey, you got to help them. know, I'm sitting there saying, who are we going to help? You know, it's, my heart goes out for young people because they have their whole lives ahead of them. But everyone should have an opportunity to live their life better. And just bugs the hell out of me that insurance is, they've turned their backs to the medical society, but I'm going to change it.

I've already been in touch with a couple of Trump's best friends. I'm going to get in front of him. Remember I said I'm going to change this. So,

Vicki Atkinson (16:40)

can hear that.

Go Micki. Yeah. We'll be cheering you on. But I love what you said about your granddaughter because that's her life. So Anthony's in a wheelchair and let's get on with it. There's stuff to do. It's the little champion within her. ~

Micki Purcell (17:04)

She's a warrior and she had a, she convinced the principal of the school when she was in grade school to have everybody wear Walking with Anthony shirt and then everyone would contribute like, you know, 10 bucks to the charity. We raised like 600 bucks, but it was, it was, it was cool that she did it. Lemonade stands. These, my other granddaughter, my two granddaughters had lemonade stands for Walking with Anthony on the street. I mean, it's just, it's crazy, but.

Vicki Atkinson (17:24)

Yeah.

Micki Purcell (17:34)

You know, it's good that people realize that helping people is very rewarding. And I'm just passionate because I know I've seen my son get better, healthier. You've seen the video of him when he was hurt. Did you see the video of him trying to put shoes on?

Vicki Atkinson (17:50)

Yes. my gosh. Yeah. Yeah. And he wanted to give up. You could see that he was like over and over again, ready to bail. But there people around him who were not going to have it. He was going to stick with it and get it done. Right?

Micki Purcell (17:52)

Yeah, so.

Well, I, you know, I dragged him out of bed every day and threw him in the car, drove him to rehab. He wasn't going to get away with it. But Anthony was an athlete and he knew what it took to work

hard, you know, strive. But he has really beat all odds. And I still think he's going to do some great things. There's wonderful trials coming up that I'm looking at. I've looked at everything out there.

and there's some new stem cells that are coming into the United States that I'm excited about. ~ So, yeah, we're getting the word out to as many people as we can and we need money. If anyone's listening out there, go to my website, walkingwithantony.org and donate and change somebody's life.

Vicki Atkinson (18:52)

The other thing that you're doing though, the ADA is not that old. And I think there are still issues that I'm aware of in Illinois where maintenance for things like curb cuts, it's like, ~ it's optional. I'm not going to do that. You are doing such a service in general about people who navigate differently, those who use wheelchairs, that curb cuts aren't an option. You have to continue to have the rallying cry.

for things that are essential but can't be forgotten.

Micki Purcell (19:25)

was in Ocean City, Maryland, we have a family reunion every year, and you know, 200 people because our family's so big. My mother was in an apartment building. And I went to visit her. And this is about four years ago, there was no way for a wheelchair to get upstairs. They had an elevator, but there was stairs. No, well, when I got to the people who own that building, when I got to the right people here, there was a ramp.

Yes. If I walk into a restaurant, there's no way I mean, I'm an advocate. I'll go in there. You'll hear my mouth all over the place. I not. Yes. I mean, I'm an advocate to that. But yeah. So and if I see someone pulled into a parking lot that's for handicap and I know damn well they're not handicapped, I'll go right up to them and I'll write down their license plate, scare the hell out of them. They run out of there.

Vicki Atkinson (20:15)

You go.

Wynne Leon (20:16)

This is the 35th anniversary of the American for Disabilities Act, right? Have you seen things improve in your...

Vicki Atkinson (20:22)

Yeah, 1990.

Micki Purcell (20:27)

I've seen things improve, but they're not there 100 % yet. Yeah, they got a ways to go. Right. So, but yeah, I've seen them improve. But it's amazing how I was thrown into this. mean, one instant in a second, my life completely changed and I haven't stopped. It's crazy.

Wynne Leon (20:44)

I'm good for you for taking up the...

Vicki Atkinson (20:46)

Yeah, but I've got to ask what do you do to take care of yourself? Because you do a lot for a lot of people. What do you do to take care of you?

Micki Purcell (20:55)

First of all, I'm involved in different businesses. This is not my only business. But I get up every morning and I get on the treadmill. I say my prayers. I work out. I eat healthy. I keep myself in shape. And I don't stop all day. But it's rewarding. It's a lot of work. But when you have a mother on the phone crying, thanking me, my god, thank you so much. I could have never. That's so rewarding to me.

that I'm changing somebody, I'm giving them hope, like you guys said. ~ It's just, and I want to say that my niece, Tanya, ~ it's crazy, but when all this happened, she was at my side, she's been with me 15 years and she works with me right now, we're planning this event and she stays at my apartment with me and we get up in the morning and we sit there and crunch it out. So many details. This event is, can't wait for you to see the event last year. We'll see what we do.

Vicki Atkinson (21:29)

Yeah.

Micki Purcell (21:53)

But she's been at my side and I don't know why, but she has and ~ it's great. So mean, we're lean and mean and ~ we have a lot of people that do a lot for us, a lot of auction items and donations and things like that, but we work really hard and every penny goes to someone. I have not taken a dime from this. So it's really important to me to help as many people as we can. ~

It's amazing the different emails every day I read about someone getting shot, someone slipping and falling, diving in the pool, diving in the ocean, surfing. There's so many accidents happening out there. And the fact that insurance won't help these people, it's just, it's horrific.

Vicki Atkinson (22:42)

Yeah, it's shameful, just shameful. Terrible. And I have to ask, is it was Anthony's cousin and his name begins with a B, Bernie? No? Bernie? Right, but I started to sob when I read that part of your book about the accident because I think if I captured it correctly, it was kind of cold for going swimming.

Micki Purcell (22:51)

That's that's who's

Vicki Atkinson (23:06)

and Anthony and Bernie were kind of talking about it. it's that like in a little moment, he chose not to dive in, you know, but his cousin Anthony did. And I think, you know, you're so forthcoming in what you write, but that those are the moments that hang with the survivors, the bystanders. So, you know,

Micki Purcell (23:27)

with them and that you wouldn't be here today.

Vicki Atkinson (23:29)

Right. But the fact that you include that, you know, because it forever changed your whole family in a variety of ways, but my heart kind of still goes out to him. Right. Yes. Yeah. In a different way.

Wynne Leon (23:44)

You mentioned this year your event which is stand up for a cause it's on October 24th in Newport Beach is that do I have that right? Can you say it more about what's what's what's the program is for that night?

Micki Purcell (23:51)

Yes, we do. ~

The program is a.

a huge event, 400 people. It's red carpet media. ~ We have ~ it's a sit down dinner, beautiful speakers, surprises, silent auction, live auction, the best band in town. It's a lot of fun. ~ And anyone who attends will never miss another one. So it's so much fun. we

people come in and they see what we're doing and they're very generous. and it's just a wonderful evening. It's a, it's a great time at the Balboa Bay club, is a resort in Newport beach, It's right on the water and beautiful ballroom. it's just a lot. mean, the night goes fast. It's fun. You meet a lot of great people. You'll see people that, have progressed.

Vicki Atkinson (24:40)

beautiful resort, yeah.

Micki Purcell (24:53)

people who have just gotten hurt, know, CEOs of companies, we're honoring Hoag Hospital, the doctors of the Spine Institute. They'll all be there. ~ Like again, we're honoring the Dr. Daniel Amen. We're honoring Ali Stroker, who is the actor in the wheelchair. So there's a lot going on ~ and it's gonna be a great evening and anyone listening that lives in the area.

I suggest you attend and come up to me and let me know you heard this podcast. And I think it'll be really fun for you to come and see who we all are.

Wynne Leon (25:32)

It sounds amazing. You mentioned Tony award-winning actress, Ali Stoker. She's been in a wheelchair since she was two or three.

Micki Purcell (25:43)

Yep. Yep. Amazing. And yeah, she's done a lot. If you, if you Google her, she's done a lot and she's a force to be reckoned with in the SCI community. She's doing a lot more than, that she'll announce when she's ready, but she's, very, very involved and I'm really excited for her to fly from New York and come visit us. So it's exciting. ~

Vicki Atkinson (26:05)

Well, and we can't endorse your book enough. It's, know, as a companion, you know, to this podcast and you know how mission driven you and Anthony and Walking with Anthony, all of that, all that your philanthropy is doing. We encourage people to also read the book because there's so much there that we see your heart, Micki.

Micki Purcell (26:27)

Thank you.

appreciate you guys really digging in and peeling the layers. appreciate that. great things too. I appreciate your podcast and getting the word out. ~ It's it's great. I'm honored to be here today and I appreciate your time.

Wynne Leon (26:32)

Thank you guys.

Thank you, Micki. You are our force and we are just delighted to spend this time with you. Thank you.

Micki Purcell (26:47)

All

Wynne Leon (26:53)

Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration see aviva.com A-V-I-T-I-V-A dot com. ~

Micki Purcell (27:10)

you