Stephen Pirrello, 37, was on vacation with his family last July at Long Beach Island, NJ, when his hands began to tingle. Three days later he entered the emergency room at an acute-care hospital and collapsed. He was completely paralyzed and unable to see or breathe on his own. Stephen was placed in a medically induced coma and intubated. A healthy individual who had never been in the hospital before, his sudden illness came as a complete shock to his family and physicians.

A spinal tap revealed that he had Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS), a debilitating neurological condition where the body’s immune system attacks the protective coating of the peripheral nerves. Physicians were not optimistic that he would recover, let alone walk again. Stephen doesn’t remember much about the first few weeks of his illness. He couldn’t move his limbs or speak, and he had double vision.

Nearly two months after the onset of GBS, Stephen began to get some sensation back in his hands and feet. He chose Good Shepherd Specialty Hospital in Bethlehem for the next phase of his recovery because the facility specializes in ventilator weaning and complex medical conditions.

At the beginning of October, Stephen was weaned from the ventilator, and once he was able to pass swallowing tests, he began eating again. He then transferred to the Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Hospital in Allentown to begin intensive therapy – three or more hours a day. Physicians were still doubtful that Stephen would walk again, but he put his heart and soul into therapy, doing exercises in his room when he wasn’t in the therapy gym working with staff.

When Stephen was discharged home in December, he was still in a wheelchair, but he set a goal of being able to walk within 12 to 18 months of the onset of GBS. He continued therapy as an outpatient with Good Shepherd’s Neurorehabilitation program in Allentown.

He briefly used a walker, followed by a cane. Then in March, months ahead of the goal he set for himself, he began walking unassisted. Every day he achieved something new, whether it was washing dishes or keeping up with his three young children.

In early May, only 10 months after being close to death, Stephen returned to his job as a field examiner for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. He assists disabled veterans or their surviving spouses with their benefits, finances, and medical and living arrangements. He returned to work with a new perspective.

“It’s been an awakening to have been in the same position as the people I work with,” says Stephen. “I have a better understanding of what they are going through. I really love my job and the people I serve.”

Stephen’s recovery is not over – he still has severe nerve pain, tingling in his hands and a condition called foot drop. With his strength, determination and support system, there’s no stopping him from resuming every activity he enjoyed before GBS.