



# SpineFirst



## 2024 Annual Report

### Friends -

As we reflect on the past year, I want to take a moment to recognize the incredible achievements of our team. I'm deeply grateful to the SpineFirst team and our colleagues for consistently delivering the highest quality spine care and for always putting exceptional patient care at the heart of our practice and values. 2024 has been a year of growth, change, and learning, allowing us to expand our platform and strengthen our voice.

Among our many accomplishments, we proudly received the Joint Commission's Advanced Certification for Spine Surgery at Atrium Health Pineville, along with recertification at Atrium Health Cabarrus, hosted our third annual Symposium, and organized numerous events to foster a stronger community.

I am incredibly proud to lead this team and witness the progress we've made over the past three years. Our success wouldn't be possible without the hard work, enthusiasm, and dedication each of you brings to SpineFirst. As we look ahead, we're excited for the continued collaboration across teams and our shared commitment to providing outstanding care to the SpineFirst community.



Thank you for your partnership,

Paul K. Kim, MD  
Executive Medical Director,  
SpineFirst

### INCLUDED IN THIS ANNUAL REPORT Growth & Community Presence

- ▶ SpineFirst Third Annual Symposium
- ▶ SpineFirst Internship Report

### Excellence

- ▶ Joint Commission's prestigious Gold Seal of Approval for Advanced Certification in Cabarrus and Pineville

### Meet Some of the SpineFirst Team Members

- ▶ Dr. Paul Kim
- ▶ Ryan Meyers
- ▶ Yvette Vega
- ▶ Brittany Chastain

### Branding, Marketing, and Communications

- ▶ Nick's SpineFirst Journey

### Locations



## Growth & Community Presence

### SPINEFIRST HELD ITS THIRD ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON SEPTEMBER 13<sup>TH</sup> AT THE REVELRY IN CAMP NORTH END

The event united a team of experts from Atrium Health and Carolina Neurosurgery and Spine Associates, including spine surgeons, physiatrists, physical therapists, and more! The audience gained a better understanding of nonsurgical and surgical patient management, with presentations focusing on clinical indicators and their direct impact on spine care outcomes by making informed decisions that drive superior patient results. Attendees gained valuable insights into the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration and key elements of care coordination. We look forward to hosting our fourth Annual SpineFirst Symposium later this fall. We will communicate more details as we secure a date and venue – stay tuned for exciting updates!



### SPINEFIRST INTERNSHIP REPORT: Insights and Impact on Growth, Efficiency, and Collaboration

Our 2024 SpineFirst intern, Jennings Culpepper, conducted a series of interviews with teammates to gain a better understanding of the past three years as SpineFirst has grown to include over 30 providers across 18 locations. By discussing existing workflows, reviewing data, and performance metrics with the team, Jennings was able to highlight areas of opportunity and provide actionable improvements to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Findings were presented to the SpineFirst Board of Managers in a clear, data-driven report which will guide future strategy and operational adjustments.



In Jennings' interviews and observations, SpineFirst teammates emphasized the significant impact SpineFirst has made on comprehensive spine care in the greater Charlotte region. Effective leadership and communication have been essential in fostering collaboration between Atrium Health and Carolina Neurosurgery and Spine Associates, as evidenced by successful symposiums and Advanced Certifications in Spine Surgery at three of our surgical facilities, along with the development of the Second Opinion Clinic. With a shared focus on delivering high-quality patient care, SpineFirst continues to be able to elevate its brand and visibility to the greater community.

# Excellence



## ATRIUM HEALTH CABARRUS

Atrium Health Cabarrus has once again been recognized as an Advanced Spine Surgery Center of Excellence by the Joint Commission, earning the prestigious Gold Seal of Approval for the second consecutive year. This distinction, held by only 29 hospitals nationwide, highlights the hospital's unwavering commitment to providing the highest quality of spine care. Atrium Health Cabarrus earned high marks for safe, patient-centered care, infection prevention, medication management, and desirable patient outcomes, such as a lower complication rates, quicker recovery times, and high patient satisfaction.

*"Being able to offer this level of care close to home is a significant benefit to the communities we serve,"* said Dr. Byron Branch, spine program medical director at Atrium Health Cabarrus. *"This achievement is a direct result of the dedication of our surgical, nursing, and rehabilitation teams at Cabarrus, who work collaboratively to ensure exceptional care and outcomes for our spine patients."*



## Meet Some of the SpineFirst Team Members

As we reflect on three years of accomplishments, we want to highlight a few members of our community who are instrumental in driving the development and success of SpineFirst.

### DR. PAUL KIM | SPINEFIRST EXECUTIVE MEDICAL DIRECTOR

Dr. Paul Kim is responsible for the balance of strategy and building a platform for excellence with all our providers across all facilities. This includes working closely with committee leaders to oversee comprehensive non-operative and surgical care for outpatient and inpatient populations. Dr. Kim has enjoyed his years as a member of the SpineFirst team and speaks fondly about the collaboration with individuals across different specialties and departments, plus office staff, *"When you are a part of the team, you appreciate how every person is eager to be more involved and you truly feel like an important piece of the partnership. Our common goal is to deliver high-quality care to all patients. And we have fun doing it too!"* Dr. Kim has cared for countless patients during his tenure with SpineFirst, and expressed enjoyment in being able to witness patients develop relationships with their care teams throughout their journey, *"When patients transition from conservative care to requiring surgery and acute care, they benefit greatly from the relationships they have built. I'm genuinely touched by all our teammates that constantly encourage and care for patients and want them to heal."* In the future, Dr. Kim is excited for SpineFirst to continue building upon its solid foundation and infrastructure for comprehensive spine care and for how leaders coordinate spine care throughout our partnership.



## ATRIUM HEALTH PINEVILLE

We are excited to announce that Atrium Health Pineville earned the Joint Commission's prestigious Gold Seal of Approval for Advanced Certification in Spine Surgery in May 2024! This recognition reflects the hospital's consistency adherence to the highest performance standards in spine care.

The certification process consisted of a rigorous, two-day, in-person site visit. Atrium Health Pineville was assessed on meeting patient needs through safe and accessible facilities, patient-specific therapy, evidence-based interventions and the patient's involvement in care.

The review highlighted exceptional commitment to patient care demonstrated by leaders and staff across various teams, including nursing, pre-operative care, the operating room, post-anesthesia care, and rehabilitation.

Alicia Campbell, Vice President and Facility Executive for Atrium Health Pineville, shared her pride in the achievement, *"We are incredibly proud of the outstanding care our teams at Atrium Health Pineville provide each day. Being certified by the Joint Commission is evidence of our commitment to providing our patients the highest quality of spine services and medical expertise in the greater Charlotte region."*

## Meet Some of the SpineFirst Team Members *continued*

### RYAN MEYERS | DIRECTOR OF CAROLINA CENTER FOR SPECIALTY SURGERY



Ryan Meyers has been a part of Carolina Center for Specialty Surgery (CCSS) since it opened its doors in 2007, and her role is pivotal to our partnership in how she supports all patients and teammates. Within her everyday roles, Ryan is ensuring that all operations run smoothly, from front desk tasks to procedures being performed in the OR, and engaging with patients. Ryan is a proud member of the SpineFirst team, highlighting the partnership and efforts that are required to create a successful joint venture. *“SpineFirst has created an environment where care is easily accessible to all patients regardless of where they are in their care journey,”* says Ryan, *“SpineFirst is a very cohesive joint venture and I’m grateful to have been part of this team since the beginning.”* During her years at CCSS, Ryan has connected with thousands of patients who have undergone procedures with SpineFirst providers. She recalls a handful of interactions that emphasize the benefits of the SpineFirst partnership. This includes patients coming to the surgery center from locations outside the Greater Charlotte region to receive high-quality care and multiple emails and letters expressing gratitude to the staff for the exceptional care they received at CCSS. When asked about the future of SpineFirst, Ryan says, *“I’m just excited to continue being part of the collaboration between Carolina Neurosurgery and Spine Associates and Atrium Health. I look forward to developing more innovative, high-level treatments and broadening the spectrum of procedures we can offer at CCSS.”* During her free time, Ryan enjoys spending quality time with her daughter, who is currently pursuing a career in nursing.



CAROLINA CENTER FOR  
SPECIALTY SURGERY  
*Centered Around Patients*

### YVETTE VEGA SPINEFIRST PROGRAM MANAGER



Yvette Vega is responsible for SpineFirst’s overall operations and significant bodies of work, including day-to-day support of scheduling teams, ongoing maintenance of Joint Commission programs, plus much more! During her 18 months with the team, she has helped lead efforts in planning the Annual SpineFirst Symposium, developing the spine patient appointment pathway, and organizing the Joint Commission’s Advanced Certification in Spine Surgery across three different facilities. *“I’m really proud to be a part of a team that is genuinely passionate about their patients and nurtures a supportive environment for all teammates,”* she says, *“I’ve really enjoyed building relationships with all my colleagues, from surgeons to nurses, and administrative staff. Every day is different from the previous and I’m grateful for everyone who has contributed to the success of SpineFirst.”* Though her interaction with patients is limited, Yvette has enjoyed witnessing staff-patient relationships develop and works with the marketing to highlight those moments through patient stories that the SpineFirst team publishes every quarter. Yvette is most excited to continue working with leaders across all SpineFirst facilities to promote standardized, comprehensive spine care across the Greater Charlotte region.

### BRITTANY CHASTAIN SPINEFIRST SCHEDULING LEADER



Brittany Chastain is excellent at both identifying the right provider and quickest access for patients seeking SpineFirst care. She is enthusiastic about connecting with patients within a short timeframe after receiving their appointment request and having a direct line of communication with care providers to ensure that the patient is cared for appropriately and in a timely manner. To accomplish this, Brittany is responsible for answering the SpineFirst telephone line, scheduling patients, answering messages from providers, and constantly monitoring new SpineFirst requests. *“I’m most proud of our team’s efficiency,”* says Brittany, *“I’ve had friends and family members who had referrals placed with SpineFirst and I feel a deep sense of security for my loved ones knowing that they will be cared for.”* Brittany recalls a handful of positive patient experiences during her time with SpineFirst. She describes, *“Seeking care can often be scary for patients, especially when they are considering spine surgery. I’m always happy to listen to patients and provide them with options with different providers, depending on their needs. It helps that we have a great team of surgeons, APPs, physiatrists and physical therapists.”* When she’s not busy with referrals, Brittany spends most of her time with her new puppy and is a proud, first-time homeowner!

## Branding, Marketing and Communications

### NICK'S SPINEFIRST JOURNEY: Overcoming Pain and Pursuing Passion

When Nick Bagnardi first heard the words “spinal fusion” as the best option to treat his chronic back pain, he was hesitant. Nick suffered from back pain for years. As a competitive powerlifter, Nick spent hours training at the gym. But the pain made his workouts brutally painful, causing him to stop squatting and deadlifting during flare-ups. Even sitting or standing too long caused him severe pain.

Nick's pain peaked during the six months leading up to his first visit with Dr. Daniel Leas, an orthopedic spine surgeon with Carolina NeuroSurgery & Spine Associates (CNSA) and a member of the SpineFirst team. SpineFirst is a partnership of two established experts in the spine field, Atrium Health and CNSA. Leas was the second doctor Nick consulted about his spine condition.

Despite Nick's hesitation, Leas was confident that the spinal fusion surgery was the right path. *“It took some encouragement and a lot of trust, but Dr. Leas helped me come to terms with surgery being the best option to lessen the pain I was in 24/7,”* Nick says. With Leas' guidance, Nick underwent a spinal fusion to tackle his relentless discomfort.

### Creating Stability, Reducing Pain

Nick had his spinal fusion at Atrium Health Cabarrus, one of six SpineFirst surgical facilities. The procedure is used to join two or more vertebrae in the spine to create stability, reduce pain and prevent further damage to the spinal cord and nerves.

*“I was nervous for the surgery and the pain and recovery to follow,”* Nick recalls. *“It was the biggest procedure I'd ever been through. Luckily, Dr. Leas has an incredible bedside manner that helped keep me calm.”* During Nick's procedure, Leas used bone grafts to fuse his vertebrae. Metal implants, such as screws, rods or plates, may also be used to hold the vertebrae in place while the fusion occurs. Over time, the bone graft material fuses with the existing bone, creating a single, solid bone mass.

### An Incredible Experience

Nick found comfort in the care Leas and the SpineFirst team provided. *“Every step – from the first meeting to my one-year checkup – has been amazing,”* says Nick. *“Dr. Leas has an incredible demeanor and is extremely personable.”* Nick benefited from the amenities and expertise offered by Atrium Health Cabarrus.



In 2022, the hospital earned the Joint Commission's Advanced Certification in Spine Surgery for demonstrating exceptional patient care, and achieved recertification in 2024.

During Nick's recovery, he followed Leas' instructions carefully and saw outstanding results. He can now lift, walk and bend without any back pain.

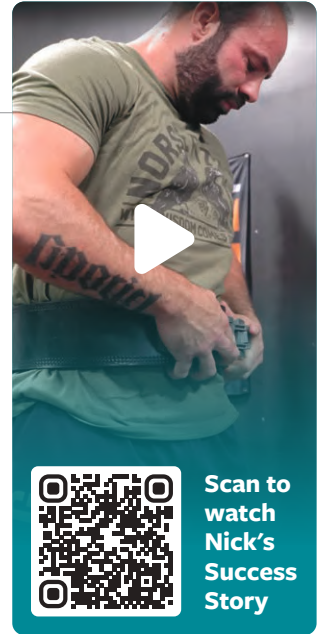
### Back to Lifting in Only Eight Months

After about eight months, Leas gave him the OK to resume training. While most activities can be resumed three months after a spinal fusion, Nick's physical demands required a longer recovery before returning to powerlifting. Nick left Leas' office and went straight to the gym. When asked to reflect on his experience, Nick offers this simple advice: Don't let fear hold you back. *“The weight that comes with spinal fusion is heavy, but it's worth every pound it carries,”* Nick says. *“The most important thing is to follow the recovery instructions. Get up and move, but don't overdo it. And never allow yourself to give up.”*

Nick is speaking from experience. On his 43rd birthday – a little over a year after his spinal fusion – Nick participated in the Shamrock Showdown, a United States Powerlifting Association competition. At the event, he squatted 552 pounds and performed a 652-pound deadlift. He took first place in the Men's Master Class and second place in the Men's Open Age. He also set two state records for his age and weight class in the deadlift and total weight categories. *“I felt incredible,”* explains Nick. *“It was a great day and one heck of a birthday gift to myself!”*

*“Dr. Leas told me there was nothing I couldn't do once I was cleared, and I've shown him how right he was,”* Nick adds. *“My lifting has actually improved. And I can go on long walks without my feet going numb. Dr. Leas has removed this black cloud that kept me from doing the things I love – and now I'm doing them!”*

As Nick continues his journey, he hopes to inspire others facing similar challenges by sharing his story of resilience and trust.



### Locations

SpineFirst provides complete spine care throughout the greater Charlotte area, including 12 Carolina NeuroSurgery & Spine Associates and Atrium Health Musculoskeletal Institute Sports Medicine locations. We perform surgical procedures at 6 regional facilities.

Call **704-831-4000** to schedule an appointment today.

#### **CAROLINA NEUROSURGERY & SPINE ASSOCIATES LOCATIONS**

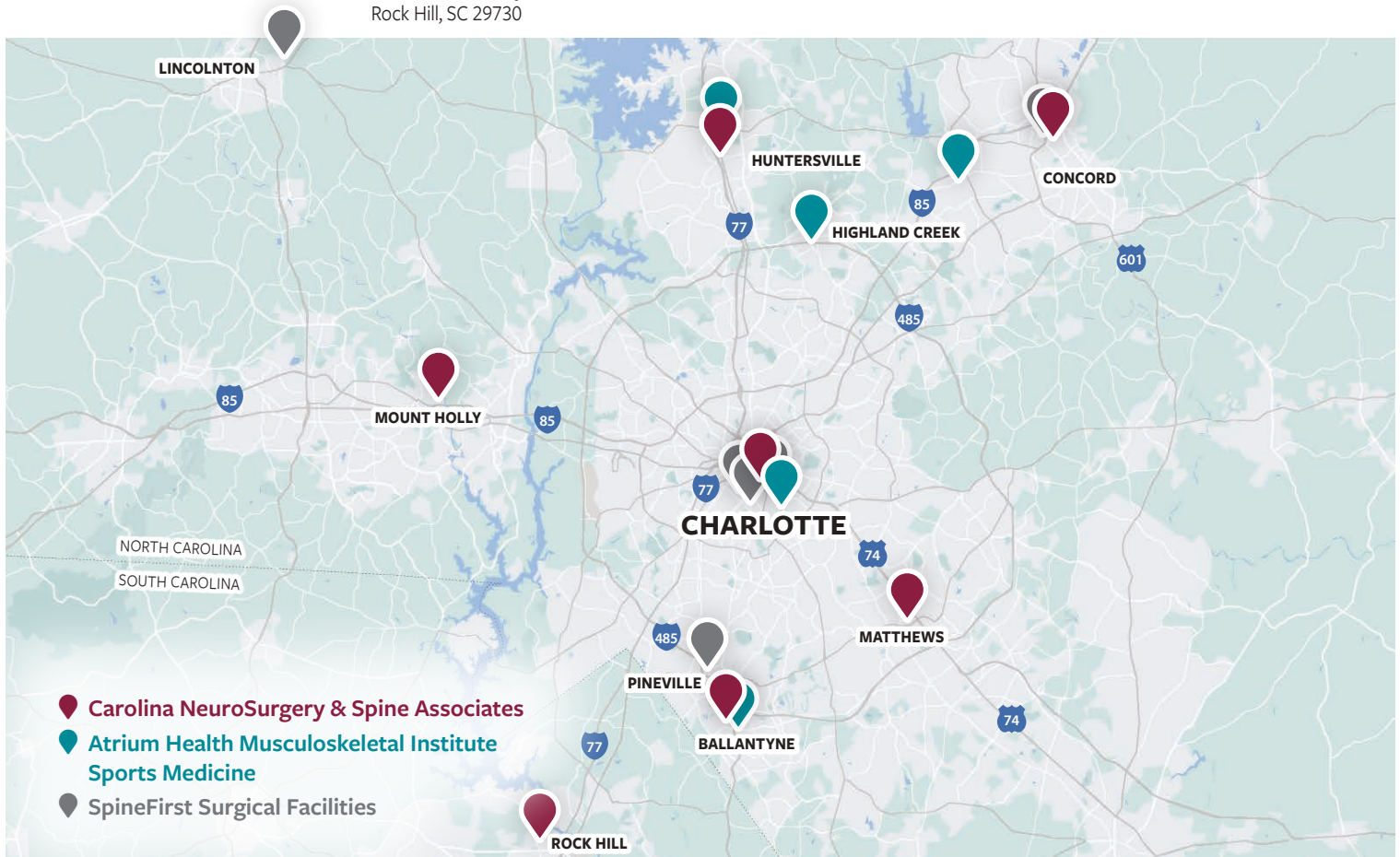
- ▶ **Ballantyne**  
14135 Ballantyne Corp. Pl., #100  
Charlotte, NC 28277
- ▶ **Charlotte**  
225 Baldwin Ave., Charlotte, NC 28204
- ▶ **Concord**  
110 Lake Concord Rd. NE  
Concord, NC 28025
- ▶ **Huntersville/Lake Norman**  
10314 Hamptons Park Dr.  
Huntersville, NC 28078
- ▶ **Matthews**  
1401 Matthews Twp. Pkwy., #300  
Matthews, NC 28105
- ▶ **Mount Holly**  
550 Mt Holly Medical Pkwy.  
Belmont, NC 28012
- ▶ **Rock Hill**  
937 Riverwalk Pkwy., #101  
Rock Hill, SC 29730

#### **ATRIUM HEALTH MUSCULOSKELETAL INSTITUTE SPORTS MEDICINE LOCATIONS**

- ▶ **Ballantyne**  
14214 Ballantyne Lake Rd., #150  
Charlotte, NC 28277
- ▶ **Charlotte**  
5735 Prosperity Crossing Dr., #2100  
Charlotte, NC 28269
- ▶ **Charlotte**  
3030 Randolph Rd., #105-B  
Charlotte, NC 28211
- ▶ **Concord**  
5651 Poplar Tent Rd., #102  
Concord, NC 28027
- ▶ **Huntersville**  
9726 Sam Furr Rd.  
Huntersville, NC 28078

#### **SPINEFIRST SURGICAL FACILITIES**

- ▶ **Atrium Health Cabarrus**  
920 Church St. N  
Concord, NC 28025
- ▶ **Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center**  
1000 Blythe Blvd.  
Charlotte, NC 28203
- ▶ **Atrium Health Lincolnton**  
433 Mcalister Rd.  
Lincolnton, NC 28092
- ▶ **Atrium Health Mercy**  
2001 Vail Ave.  
Charlotte, NC 28207
- ▶ **Atrium Health Pineville**  
10628 Park Rd.  
Charlotte, NC 28210
- ▶ **Carolina Center for Specialty Surgery**  
1822 Brunswick Ave.  
Charlotte, NC 28207



We want to hear from you! Please reach out to our SpineFirst team with questions, comments, or feedback by emailing us at [SpineFirst@AtriumHealth.org](mailto:SpineFirst@AtriumHealth.org).