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Where Are They Now? Catching up with John Shinsky

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Talk about it in [The Underground Bunker](#)

For every one of his 56 years, **John Shinsky** has been overcoming odds.

Shinsky's father died when he was just eight years old. Shortly after that, his overwhelmed mother placed him in the Parmadale Orphanage in Cleveland. That was where he stayed for the next four years, until the Weiss family opened their doors to him as a foster child.



MSU Athletics

John Shinsky earned second-team All-Big Ten honors in 1973 after recording 88 tackles, including 10 for losses.

Shinsky spent his teen years with the Weiss's, becoming a star football player and wrestler at Cleveland St. Joseph and earning a scholarship to Michigan State in 1969, in a class that included **Brad Van Pelt**, **Joe DeLamielleure** and **Billy Joe Dupree**.

As a Spartan, Shinsky excelled on the field and in the classroom. He earned three letters (1970, 72, 73) on the gridiron as a defensive tackle and Academic All-America honors in 1973. Shinsky received a bachelor's degree in elementary and special education from Michigan State in 1974.

Shinsky was good enough to get offered a tryout with the World Football League in 1974. However, he knew that with three knee operations and one back operation then under his belt, other options outside of professional football were needed. The option he chose was to begin a career in education.

Shinsky spent three decades as an educator and administrator in the Lansing Public School District. He earned a masters degree in special education in 1977 and a Ph.D. in educational administration in 1983, both from Michigan State.

Dr. Shinsky currently serves at Grand Valley State University as an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and the Department Chairperson of the Leadership and Human Services Department.

However, those are just footnotes to a larger story.

MAKING A PROMISE

Back when his football career at Michigan State was just beginning, Shinsky made a promise to himself that one day, he would open an orphanage. He wanted to give others the opportunities that Parmadale gave to him.

"For 30 years, I kept that promise in my mind," Shinsky said. "Then about a decade ago I was on a flight to Brownsville, Texas for some educational training. I sat next to a young college kid on the flight. I asked him, 'So where are you going?' He said, 'I'm going on spring break.' I said, 'What are you going to do?' The kid said, 'I'm going down to work at this orphanage in Matamoros, Mexico, just over the Texas border. It's an awful place, rats and everything.'"

Shinsky then said to him, "'Well, why don't you send me some information on the place.' Later on he did. And I took a look at the information and decided to go down and see the orphanage. When I got down there, after I had seen everything, I asked the people running the orphanage, 'What can I do to help you?' I thought they would say they needed something like food, clothes or money.

"Instead they said, 'We need a new orphanage.'

"And I knew right then," Shinsky said. "That was it. They had some property already for a new orphanage. I bought some more property alongside theirs. And then I began to bring Michigan State groups and spring break groups down. We began to build nine new wooden buildings and turned those over to the orphanage operators."

"Next in 2005, a local Mexican businessman, Mr. Ramiro Gonzalez Garza, called me," Shinsky continued. "He said, 'I really like what you're doing down here. I have seventeen acres in Matamoros and I'd like to donate it to you to build another orphanage.'"

At that point John and his wife Cindy, founded Ciudad De Los Ninos De Matamoros (The City of Children of Matamoros) Orphanage and got right to work.

"We created a Mexican and United States board of directors," Shinsky said, "and began to put together a plan for this new project."

A NEW CHALLENGE

Late last year, Shinsky received news that he had a cancerous tumor in his neck, near the base of his skull.

The one-time orphan took this new challenge head on.

"I began both radiation and chemotherapy treatments on my birthday, November 5, 2007," Shinsky said, "and they ended December 20. When I got done, I had gone through 33 radiation treatments and two chemotherapy treatments."

Shinsky then described the treatment process in detail.

"They put a mesh mask over your face to hold your mouth open and lay you back on the table," he said. "Next, they screw the mask to the table to hold you still. Then, they shoot radiation into your mouth and throat for 35 minutes to attack the tumor.

"About 95 percent of the people who have this kind of cancer, they end up on a feeding tube," Shinsky said. "But I just kept trying to eat a little bit at a time as best I could. But, it was tough. I had all kinds of blisters and sores in my mouth. I was nauseous. I couldn't cough. I couldn't talk. I had zero taste. My taste is back now about 75%, but for a long time I couldn't taste anything."

To look at John Shinsky today, you would never know he was fighting cancer just six months ago. He has regained most of the weight he lost during his radiation treatments and is working out daily again just like he has for years. He says he is doing well and the cancer is currently in remission.

"Somebody said to me recently that my getting cancer was so unfair," Shinsky said. "But let me tell what unfair is. Unfair is a 3-year old kid who is being abused by their father. Unfair is a foster kid who gets shuffled around to four or five different homes and he's getting abused at every one. Unfair is what happened to Ricky Holland, the little boy who was adopted and killed right in our hometown. What I got is a disease. What happens to those kids is unfair."

While Shinsky's recovery from – and attitude toward – his disease is awe inspiring, Shinsky himself remains amazed by the efforts of his friends and family in putting together this week's charitable event, as much of the ground work was done while he was focused on his cancer battle.

While John was battling cancer, his wife, Cindy, was working harder than ever to raise money for Ciudad De Los Ninos.

"In January, when I began to get back to normal," Shinsky said, "my wife told me that she had an event she was putting together for the orphanage. We had wanted to do something local for the orphanage for a really long time. So she got together with Kellie Dean (of Dean Transportation), and some other folks to put together this event for Thursday, May 15.

For this latest fundraiser, the Shinsky's have joined together with Lansing Catholic High School to hold the 24th Annual Father Mac Dinner. This event honors Father Jerome V. MacEachin, longtime pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish and East Lansing and, for over thirty years, the official chaplain of the MSU football team. This year's dinner will feature NFL Hall of Famer **Terry Bradshaw** as the keynote speaker and will take place at the Jack Breslin Student Events Center Thursday, beginning at 5:30 p.m.

The money raised from the Father Mac Dinner will benefit both Ciudad De Los Ninos and Lansing Catholic High School.

"I've told my wife this recently," Shinsky said, "my football career, my education, the cancer, all of that has led to the orphanage project. This is what I've wanted to do all of my life. That other stuff was a stepping stone to this moment. This is what I'm here for. This is my dream. So if something happens to me, I at least know that we are this far. And that I have a great group of people that will pick it up and take it forward."

One thing that Shinsky wants to make clear to everyone is that all of the money donated to Ciudad De Los Ninos has – and will continue to go – directly to the orphanage.

"One-hundred percent of the money we have raised for the orphanage goes directly to the project. If I fly down to Mexico, I pay for it myself. This Thursday, our treasurer is coming up to the fundraiser and I'm paying for the flight out of my own pocket.

"We have the Capital Region Community Foundation (CRCF) handle the money. The money raised goes directly to them and then we have to ask for the money. To date we have raised over \$700,000. I never in my life imagined that could happen," Shinsky said with a smile, "I'm not a fundraiser. This has been a blessing.

"We are all blessed with gifts," he continued. "And what matters is that we use those gifts to make a positive impact on people's lives; whether it's an individual or a group of people. I am fortunate to have been in tough situations where I could work and overcome them. Some people don't get that chance.

"I heard MSU football player, **Cole Malatinsky**, speak last month at the Academic Excellence Gala at the Clara Bell Smith Center (Cole won The 2007-08 Presidents Award, which is given to the top graduating male and female). Cole graduated with a 4.0 average. During his speech he said something so profound. He asked all of us something that he often asks himself. He said, 'Is there anything I'm doing that makes my life worthwhile?'

"I really thought about that," Shinsky said. "It's a very important question. If all of us can do something worthwhile in our lives – make an effort to do something positive to help somebody else – then we can really make an impact on our society. We could really transform our society into something special and create lasting, meaningful change."

If you'd like more information about Ciudad De Los Ninos Orphanage, visit their website:

www.shinskyorphanage.com

If you would like to make a tax-deductible [501 (c) (3)] contribution to the orphanage, visit the above website or contact the Capital Region Community Foundation directly at:

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