

Florence's Story



Florence with her husband Len

Absolutely! That was my answer when Dr. Eastlack's nurse asked if I was interested in telling my story. Mine is not your typical spine story, but, from what I hear, hardly any story is. Like many, my life has been full of ups and downs. It's the ups that sustain me, and for that and those in my life, I'm so grateful.

I was born in New York City and spent my formative years there. I married into a military life and traveled all over, spending a number of years in Germany before returning to the U.S. But, military life can be trying and after a number of years and 2 children, my marriage ended, thus ending a bittersweet chapter in my life. But, when one door closes, as they say, another seemingly opens. I found the man, Leonard, who I would later marry and I'm happy to say we've been married for 30 years now. Thankfully, he's been my rock during our journey forward in life.



Images show degenerative changes on the left and surgical correction and stabilization on the right

I've always been a very organized person, so I guess it's no mistake that I found a great career in healthcare administration. I learned much and worked hard and this eventually paid off, as I attained a position as Director of Operations for a Cancer Research facility in southern California. That was truly a happy time in my life. I continued with this work until I retired early, due to declining health as a result of my doctors' inability to determine why.

As it turns out, this lack of diagnosis persisted for nearly 20 years. There were no answers for me, yet, I was having strange issues with balance, strength, pain, just to name a few. Each test, each trip to another doctor yielded no definitive answer. During this time, my brother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (M.S.) two weeks before he died. Then, roughly 20 years after the first symptoms emerged, I was told I also had M.S. Hind sight being 20/20, the news came as an "ah-ha" moment. So much made sense, finally! However, this revelation was not happy news. My symptoms included back and leg pain that was progressively worsening over time. Now that we knew I had M.S., we of course attributed all my pain to this.

At that point, I entered into pain management, which included physical therapy. This helped somewhat for 2 years, but no specific treatment helped for long and I became more and more sedentary due to increasing pain in my back and legs. All the while, I very much wanted to be a part of my kids and grandkids lives. I didn't want to be "that" grandma; the one who was so fragile and couldn't play, or participate in activities. Despite my issues, my husband and I decided to move closer to my children and grandchildren, so we moved to the San Diego area after 36 years in Orange County, California. The move was a tremendous thing! I had my family close and this lifted my spirits greatly.

My pain continued to worsen and my husband and I agreed it was time to get more aggressive in finding answers. Why would M.S. be the cause of this? Did it make sense? The search led us to Scripps Clinic Spine Service and Robert K. Eastlack, MD. I was immediately put at ease by Dr. Eastlack's kindness and concern as well as his personality to never give up on me. His studies showed a physical reason for my pain apart from M.S. I had spinal stenosis (narrowing of the channels of the spine causing nerves to be pinched) along with spondylolisthesis (an abnormal slip of one vertebrae on another, leading to wear and tear to the joints of the spine). And, it wasn't caused by my M.S.! He suggested injections and coupled with more physical therapy which did help temporarily, a good sign that if surgery was needed, it would work. Despite those treatments, I was slowly losing my independence around my home due to pain.

Because the nonoperative treatments failed to have any long-lasting benefit, Dr. Eastlack recommended I have surgery. It was good to feel hope that these symptoms that I had long ago attributed to my M.S. could be alleviated.

With the support of my husband and family, I underwent surgery, which included special spacers to provide badly needed height and to help fuse the slipped vertebrae together permanently so they wouldn't move.



Along with that surgery, the nerves in that area were also “decompressed”, so that my spinal nerves would again have freedom of movement to relieve my leg pain. Finally, a posterior spinal fusion with rods and screws were placed in my back to help hold it all together (stabilize it) until the spinal fusion could knit the 2 vertebrae together permanently in the back.

My early recovery was pretty uneventful. I improved and was feeling better each of the first 3 months after surgery. Then, I sensed things starting to reverse and my level of pain was beginning to increase again. Things didn't feel right. Dr. Eastlack's assessment concluded that the necessary bony bridging needed to fuse the bone together wasn't taking in one location. The medications I have to take for my medical conditions made it harder for the bone to heal properly.

He recommended a revision surgery to replace the rods and screws to better stabilize my spine and add additional bone grafting material to improve my chances of healing. I wore a bone growth stimulator for 30 minutes each day, which looks like a small brace and helps to improve fusion. Dr. Eastlack felt my chances were still good (about 85%) that I could still get a successful outcome.

I did everything I was told to do and this time, my recovery was nearly perfect! Early on, my need for pain medication became less and less and after 3-4 weeks following the 2nd surgery, I noticed I was breathing deeper and log rolling with ease. Things became more natural for me. Not long after, I caught myself bending from my knees and eventually stopped using a cane. There is so much that I couldn't do before that I believed was caused by M.S., but happily discovered my abilities returning.

Sure, these abilities may seem simple to a fit 20-year-old, but for me with one foot literally in a wheelchair, I found a new life in my 70's. I'm happy to report that I'm largely independent

in all my activities. M.S. does still limit me some. My balance can be an issue and I've learned not to make sudden movements that could cause me to fall. And, I'm becoming more sedentary over time, but not due to back and leg pain. I'm in my 70s for crying out loud!

Mostly, I'm very pleased to have been released from the constant pain so I can enjoy every minute I can with my husband and family. Not one day goes by that we aren't grateful for where we are now.

Tips for those considering spine surgery: **YOU ARE IN CHARGE OF YOUR TREATMENT**, so don't be afraid to be assertive and be your own advocate! Be positive, even if things don't go to plan.

Get to know your potential surgeon, build a relationship and ask questions. Follow all discharge instructions, such as wearing a bone stimulator after surgery. These will help guide you to the best possible recovery. To be honest, I didn't use the bone stimulator after my first surgery. I felt a burning sensation the few times I used it and rather than call my doctor, I just stopped. Maybe I would have still needed the revision surgery, but I sure would have preferred not to have a second surgery, if given the chance. So, speak up! If there's a problem, call your doctor.

Lastly, pain can take the strongest of individuals down a path of depression, or narcotic medication dependency.

I was there at the precipice of depression myself and I've learned to avoid those paths of negativity and to ask for help when I needed it..... It worked.



Florence and Len with granddaughter Faith. Enjoying family has been an important part of Florence's recovery

I'm so grateful for New Beginnings, for gaining quality time with Len and my family, time I never thought I'd have again.

San Diego Spine Foundation would like to thank Florence for sharing her story, which we hope will provide guidance and inspiration for those who are in need of help, regardless the problem.