

IT'S LIKE A MIRACLE

BRAIN AND SPINE CENTER GETS BEDRIDDEN PATIENT

BACK ON HER FEET

BY ANDREA MONGLER

Shirley Bowling loves leading an active life. She enjoys making quilts for her children and grandchildren, reading and – most of all – working in her gardens. She's also the regent of her Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) chapter.

A couple of years ago she did all this and more without any problems. But then things changed.

Bowling, now 72, began to have backaches. At first she might notice some pain at the end of a long day – when she was doing the dishes, perhaps. But then it got much worse, and it didn't go away.

“The pain radiated from my spine into my left hip, down my leg to my ankle,” Bowling says. “It was absolutely unbearable and intractable.”

Before she knew it, her active life had become a thing of the past. She couldn't sit long enough to quilt or read. She wasn't able to bend over or even pick up her eight-pound Maltese dog. She couldn't walk. She couldn't even clean her own house or change the sheets on her bed.



"It affected everything in my life," Bowling says. "The things that other people take for granted were intolerable for me. The most awful thing for me was giving up gardening. I have beautiful gardens, but I could no longer work in them."

She spent almost all her time in bed. "I was almost an invalid," she says.

She had been doing some physical therapy, but on its own it wasn't giving her any relief. She didn't know what to do.

Then she met with Michael Polinsky, MD, a neurosurgeon at the Brain and Spine Center at St. Luke's Hospital. He suggested she see Anne Christopher, MD, a pain management specialist at the Center.

"My job is to combine interventional procedures as part of an overall treatment plan, which can also include physical therapy and strength training, to help alleviate the patient's pain," Dr. Christopher says.

This is part of the Brain and Spine Center's unique approach – offering patients comprehensive care in one location. Neurosurgeons, neurologists, physical medicine and rehabilitation specialists, physical therapists and pain management specialists work as a team to offer each patient the best possible treatment plan. Because all these specialists are housed under one roof, they assess patients' needs immediately and can consult with one another simply by walking down the hall.

In Bowling's case, her pain was caused by spinal stenosis, which is a narrowing of the canal where the nerves exiting the spinal cord run. The condition puts pressure on the nerves, causing pain. Both arthritis and disc degeneration were contributing to the stenosis.



Shirley Bowling owes her newly pain-free days to St. Luke's Brain and Spine Center and Dr. Anne Christopher

Dr. Christopher first performed a diagnostic intervention to identify precisely where Bowling's pain was coming from. This involved a series of injections, known as nerve blocks, over the course of several months.

"It can take a few shots before we hit the nail on the head and get the medicine in exactly the right place to alleviate the pain," she says.

It happened for Bowling back in September. After the injection, she was free from pain for six months – and then it was time for another shot to control the pain again.

"To have relief is just wonderful. It's like getting my life back," she says.

But she doesn't manage her pain with the injections alone. As part of the Brain and Spine Center's comprehensive approach to pain management, she also does strength training and attends physical therapy sessions at the center two or three times a week.

"Shirley started strength training right away," Dr. Christopher says. "It took her awhile to build up her core strength, but now that she has,

with the nerve blocks, strength training and physical therapy, she is able to manage her symptoms completely without needing surgery."

And that means Bowling can once again manage her own day-to-day affairs – and do the things she loves.

"I'm thrilled to death. It's almost like a miracle," she says.

Bowling is grateful to the physicians and staff at the Brain and Spine Center for all the care she receives there – care Dr. Christopher says patients would be hard-pressed to find anywhere else.

"The true collaborative nature of the Brain and Spine Center makes it a rare and wonderful place to work," Dr. Christopher says. "I came here from another state because I felt that this is the best way to care for patients."

Bowling says she hopes others with serious back pain will find out about and visit the Brain and Spine Center.

"I love everyone at the Center dearly; they are so kind," she says. "How could you not love people who gave you your life back?" ■

I GOT MY LIFE BACK

BRAIN AND SPINE CENTER GIVES MOTHER OF THREE RELIEF FROM EXCRUCIATING PAIN



BY ANDREA MONGLER

Amy Benoist had suffered severe back pain for years. For so long, in fact, that she couldn't remember what it was like to have a pain-free day.

But she lived with it – taking care of her small children, exercising regularly, traveling with her husband – until it became unbearable.

“From the moment after I had my third child, when I first stood up, I thought, ‘Oh, dear,’” Amy says. The pain in her back, and even down her right leg, was so bad she could hardly take it anymore.

Amy, 38, has spondylolisthesis, which occurs when one vertebra slips forward onto the adjacent vertebra, producing a gradual deformity of the lower spine.

“She was born with some spinal problems, and they got worse over time with the normal bending, twisting, stress and strain of everyday life,” says Michael Boland, MD, a neurosurgeon at the Brain and Spine Center at St. Luke's Hospital. “Eventually this led to nerve compression and pain.”

After Amy's third child was born, she knew surgery was an option, but she shied away. “I did not want to have surgery,” she says. “There is a prevalent negative stigma associated with fusion surgery.”

But her options were running out. Over the past decade, she had tried epidurals, acupuncture, traction, self-medication and “what seemed like every physical therapist in the city.” Nothing eased the pain.

She experienced a turning point while accompanying her husband on a business trip to Hawaii this past March. “I couldn’t walk along the beach without stopping every few minutes,” Amy says. “It was so embarrassing. I didn’t want to tell people, but I was screaming inside.”

Soon after, she took the advice of her doctor and visited the Brain and Spine Center at St. Luke’s.

“In retrospect, I wonder why I waited so long,” Amy says.

The Brain and Spine Center provides surgical and nonsurgical treatment options for neurological diseases and nervous system injuries. The Center offers a unique approach – offering patients comprehensive care in one location.

Neurosurgeons, neurologists, physical medicine and rehabilitation specialists, physical therapists, and pain management specialists work as a team to offer each patient the best possible treatment plan. Because all these specialists are housed under one roof, they assess patients’ needs immediately and can consult with one another simply by walking down the hall.

“Generally we see patients through referrals from friends and family who have been to the Brain and Spine Center for treatment or from primary care or other physicians,” Dr. Boland says.

After being referred to the center, Amy met with Dr. Boland, who recommended posterior lumbar interbody fusion. The procedure involves the removal of a disc between two vertebrae in the lower spine. Bone graft material is then inserted into the space where the disc was removed, with the goal of stimulating the two vertebrae to grow together. The primary aim is to get the pressure off of the nerve to eliminate the pain.

Although Amy was hesitant to undergo the procedure, she decided it was necessary, and in June, Dr. Boland performed the surgery.

“She had a spinal fusion, but most people do not need such major surgery. Most people can get away with medical treatment or a less invasive operation,” Dr. Boland says.

At the Brain and Spine Center, Amy was in good hands. In October 2007, healthcare ratings organization HealthGrades™ rated St. Luke’s as the best hospital in the St. Louis area for spine surgery. In addition, HealthGrades recognized St. Luke’s as one of America’s 50 Best Hospitals® for 2007.

Amy says Dr. Boland and the staff at the center did more than she could have hoped for to keep her comfortable and well-informed before and after her back operation.

“Dr. Boland called me the day before the surgery and after the surgery,” Amy says. “He gave me facts and reassurances. He was very available, very kind and very approachable.”

In the weeks immediately following the operation, Amy dealt with serious pain. But she followed Dr. Boland’s advice, walking almost immediately – “at an incredibly slow pace,” but walking nonetheless.

“Dr. Boland wants you to move,” she says. “I listened to his advice like it was the Gospel. I was so desperate to make it work.”

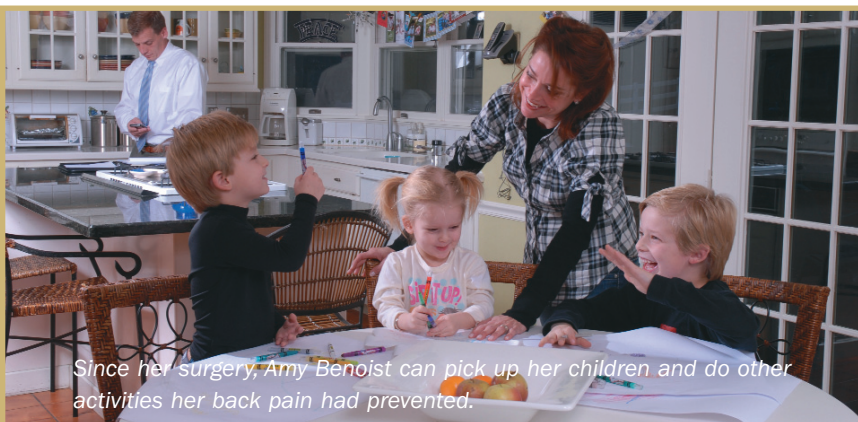
And in Amy’s opinion, it worked wonderfully. She’s already able to do some of the activities she was unable to do before the surgery. “I’m spinning again, lifting weights. I’m not running and skiing yet, but there’s no reason to believe I won’t be in the next couple of months.”

She’s enjoying life with her three children – ages 7, 5 and 2 – and her husband, Patrick, who she says has been incredibly supportive through everything she has dealt with.

“The surgery has literally changed her life; she can now pick her children up,” Dr. Boland says.

And her back pain is almost completely gone. “I haven’t taken pain medication in ages,” she says. “Before, I took it constantly.”

The recovery hasn’t always been easy, but Amy says she has no regrets about her decision to undergo the procedure. “I got my life back.” ■



Since her surgery, Amy Benoist can pick up her children and do other activities her back pain had prevented.