

walking to a new beat

Wanda Johnson is finally free of back pain, thanks to a safer, more effective approach to spine surgery

by Sally J. Clasen



Wanda Johnson of Goodyear understands the daily and debilitating effects of back pain. She's also endured the rigors of multiple back surgeries and countless therapies in an attempt to alleviate her problems, with little relief. "I had my first back surgery, a laminectomy, for a bulging disc in 1980," Wanda says. "It failed within a week, and I had another one a few weeks later."

Over the years, Wanda, age 70, has taken morphine, had spine injections and undergone fusion surgery in which titanium baskets and bone grafts were placed in her back to reduce the pressure.

"The fusion just caused more pain," she says. In 2001, she had a pain pump installed to combat the lingering issues. "It made my life bearable, but it didn't give me a good quality of life," adds Wanda, who, for the last decade, has experienced constant shooting pain in her back "with every heart beat."

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Wanda Johnson



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Randall Porter, MD

New home, new outlook

When the former teacher and high school administrator retired to Arizona in 2005 from Oregon with her husband, Jim, her life was about to change. Wanda’s internist suggested she make an appointment with neurosurgeon Randall Porter, MD, chief of the Interdisciplinary Skull Base Section and co-director of CyberKnife at Barrow Neurological Institute.

Dr. Porter initially told Wanda that more fusion surgery was not an option. “She wasn’t a good operative candidate because of her age. Her X-rays also showed very degenerative scoliosis and spinal stenosis. A 12- to 14-hour fusion surgery presented a risk for cardiac and lung complications, and the extent of the recovery was not appropriate or safe. The back muscles are destroyed in the process of such a surgery.”

Dejected, Wanda thought she would have to live the rest of her life in pain.

Soon, though, Dr. Porter contacted Wanda to tell her he had a potential solution. The neurosurgeon had attended a conference in San Diego where he trained on XLIF (eXtreme lateral interbody fusion), a less-invasive approach to spine surgery that uses instruments and devices manufactured by NuVasive, Inc.

Conferring with several of his colleagues at the conference, Dr. Porter determined Wanda would be an excellent candidate for the alternative surgery.

On February 23, 2007, Dr. Porter performed the first XLIF surgery at Barrow on Wanda, who for the first time in 25 years, experienced freedom from back pain the moment the anesthesia wore off. “When I woke up, the horrible, shooting pain was gone,” she says.

The benefits of XLIF

The benefit of the XLIF technique, according to Dr. Porter, is that 1-inch incisions made on the side (flank) of a patient allow a surgeon to directly access and visualize the most degenerative disc spaces. In traditional fusion surgery, surgeons enter through the posterior, along the side of the spine, which affects major muscles and tissue.

During the XLIF procedure, surgeons insert plastic resin wedges through a device into the disc spaces to straighten the spine. The wedges are infused with bone morphogenic protein to promote bone growth.

“With this procedure, we can use bigger wedges and restore the original disc to optimal spacing, so we get

better correction,” Dr. Porter says. Another advantage, according to Dr. Porter, is that since the XLIF can be performed in two hours, it’s quicker and safer than traditional surgery. “There’s less blood loss and less risk to the nerves. In Wanda’s case, we only lost 30 ccs of blood vs. 2,000 ccs,” he explains.

Freedom to live again

“It’s amazing,” Wanda says of her pain-free existence. “I keep waiting for the bubble to burst.” No longer dependent on a four-wheel walker, she now uses just a cane and attends physical therapy sessions to strengthen her back and legs. She’s also lost 50+ pounds, has significantly reduced her pain medication and feels her goal of walking without help within a year is attainable. “I have a new lease on life,” Wanda says.

She adds that being able to shop is one of the biggest pleasures she’s reclaimed since having the procedure. “The surgery has opened up my ability to do things again. Dr. Porter said he wouldn’t consider the surgery a success for a year, but I’ve considered it a success since day one. It’s a word used way too often, but it’s a miracle.” ■

