

BRAIN TUMOR SURGERY

Every Step is a Blessing

Every step forward is a blessing to Theodora Anderson. After being diagnosed with a brain tumor, her biggest fear about surgery to remove it was the possibility of paralysis, of not being able to take the daily walks she treasured or dance with her only son at his upcoming wedding.

The diagnosis shocked her. As an inside sales representative, Ms. Anderson spends hours typing away at her computer. One spring day, she felt a sharp, strange movement, like something shifted inside her head. Her eyesight became blurry. The symptoms passed quickly, so she dismissed them as stress-related.

A few similar episodes occurred again over the next couple of weeks then disappeared altogether. Ms. Anderson also started having inexplicable crying spells. Aware of a family history of stroke and concerned that the episodes were precursors to one, she talked to her primary care physician. A month later, an MRI revealed she had a brain tumor.

Though benign, her skull-based tumor – a meningioma – was in a precarious spot. Ms. Anderson had to see a neurosurgeon. She saw Sun H. Lee, MD, PhD, Associate Professor, Division of Neurosurgery at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital (RWJ).

“Her tumor was in a tricky area. Important structures, including the brain stem and vertebral arteries, are there, and it’s difficult to gain access to it,” Dr. Lee explained. “But her brain stem was squished, like a bean, and major vessels were involved. Surgery was necessary to prevent permanent damage.”

Surgery risks include stroke, bleeding and paralysis. Ms. Anderson researched her options and sought a second opinion. She ultimately entrusted Dr. Lee with her care. “We established a good rapport, and he took charge and seemed confident,” Ms. Anderson said. “I was facing a major, complex, scary surgery, but I knew from that first visit with Dr. Lee that if I had the operation, he would be the one to do it.”

Another benefit: patients who have this type of surgery at RWJ are afforded multi-disciplinary care, including intensive care unit nurses trained to identify warning signs of complications, otolaryngologists and Gamma Knife radio surgery to remove residual tumor.

That fall, Dr. Lee removed her meningioma. “My sister later told me that when he came out of surgery to update my family, Dr. Lee was teary-eyed when he told them he got it all,” Ms. Anderson said. “He wanted to do that for me. I can’t tell you what it means that he cared so much.”

Post-operatively, Ms. Anderson experienced temporary numbness and weakness but didn’t need additional treatment. Sensory changes persist, “but that’s minor compared to not having my motor skills,” she said.

The next summer, she walked down the aisle with her husband, Sinclair, during their son’s wedding procession and proudly danced to “A Song for Mama” with Jason at his reception.

Today, Ms. Anderson is back to her daily walks. “I’m very thankful for Dr. Lee,” she said. “He said he would take care of me, and he has.”

Shown: Theodora Anderson was able to walk down the aisle with her husband Sinclair, during their son’s wedding procession and proudly dance to “A Song for Mama” with her son Jason at his reception, after her successful brain tumor surgery at RWJ and Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

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