

Survivor Spotlight: Jennifer Zukley

For years, Jennifer Zukley lived with chronic pain in her left arm, elbow, shoulder, chest area and fingers. It wasn't until she woke up one night paralyzed and in excruciating pain that she would learn it was all related to an underlying issue with her spine.

Zukley, 47 and a Schererville police officer, had seen several doctors regarding her chronic pain prior to this incident. She was always prescribed medication, with no investigation into the cause. She was told it was tendonitis and nerve damage from previous injuries and car accidents she had been in throughout the years.

"No one ever said the pain was from something in my spine. That was never introduced to me so I had no idea that was connected." She learned the true source of her pain on April 3, 2013, when she tried to get out of bed after 2 a.m. and was paralyzed on her left side.

Later that same day, Zukley saw Gregory McComis, MD, an orthopedic surgeon and owner of North Point Orthopaedics (nportho.net) in Munster. The Schererville resident had a herniated rupture, which required a surgery called a discectomy, removal of the herniated disc.

"From the time I entered that office until my surgery a week later, it was completely the most investigative, intensive care I've ever received in my life," she said. "When they did the MRI, it looked like a career ending devastating injury.

"(Dr. McComis) had the most compassionate look on his face and he said 'We can fix this. You will return to work. You will have no more pain. It will be better than before.' Everything he said was correct." McComis said many of his patients have been previously misdiagnosed.

In Zukley's case, "This is something that had been going on for a long period of time. People thought she was having a heart attack, had shoulder problems. She was misdiagnosed for several years." He said some other physicians concentrate on only one part of the pain and miss other underlying problems. In Zukley's case, it was a pinched nerve in her neck, he said.

Zukley's discectomy was done April 12, 2013, at Franciscan St. Margaret Health in Dyer. She arrived at 6 a.m. and was home by noon the same day and already feeling better. She was surprised by how pain free she was after she woke up from recovery.

"I had full use. There were so many things wrong with my left arm. Some days I couldn't even pick up a coffee cup." Now she said she could go run a marathon.

"Actually now I have a better life than I did before. I don't have pain. When you have pain, it limits your outlook, limits your motivation, limits your attitude."

Zukley said she had learned to live with her chronic pain and planned to retire from the police force when she turned 50 but doesn't feel like that now.

"Being a police officer, it's a very physically demanding job and you have to have all your faculties. You have to be able to work out, you have to have stamina," she said. "I'm capable now. I have all the ability to continue with it. I don't know what I would have done had I not met Dr. McComis."

McComis said he has great success with his minimally invasive, outpatient technique for the discectomy.

"One of the hospital systems in the area has looked at the outcome of how patients do and I have the best outcomes for neck and back surgery of the surgeons who do that."

He is also in the top 1 percent of those outcomes in the country. He said this technique doesn't injure the muscle and causes patients less swelling and thus, less pain. They go home the same day and their recovery is that much shorter.

Zukley said she had no idea her injury could have been prevented had she received proper treatment sooner.

"I accepted that I would live my life in pain. I didn't know that this kind of injury existed in people. It had never happened to me or anyone I knew. If you are dealing with chronic pain, there are doctors out there who will investigate it and take every avenue possible to seek out the source of the pain and heal you."

McComis said that like Zukley, about one-third of his patients have been previously treated for issues they don't have.

He said one of the most critical parts of any office visit is the doctor's examination of and listening to the patient. If that doesn't happen, you should consider going elsewhere.

"That's critical," McComis said. "Everyone wants me to look at their MRI, but I have a good idea what the problem is before seeing it. Ninety five percent of the time I can tell from their description and exam."

Two years of McComis' training were done pre-MRI and the surgeons who taught him told him he just needed to listen to the patient. They didn't rely on technology to make a diagnosis.

"That's an art, that's what medicine was for 2,000 years dating back to Hippocrates and all the great thinkers."

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"A lot of people think they have to have neck pain to have a neck problem and that's not necessarily the case," said Gregory McComis, an orthopedic surgeon.

• **Look for what's called "The Statue of Liberty sign," he said. If you only have comfort when holding your arm above your head, that is a sign of a pinched nerve in the neck.**

• **Pain in the shoulder that goes down into the arm and hand is almost always a pinched nerve**

• **Numbness, tingling or any kind of weakness are other symptoms.**