

My Monday Memo

April 11, 2022

Adventures in the PNW

Issue 98

Adam Tallman Nature Park

By Rachel Brandes

On Saturday, April 9, 2022, Rachel headed to the Gig Harbor Marina to watch the sun rise behind the beautiful backdrop of the moored boats. After enjoying the sunrise, she headed to Adam Tallman Nature Park in Gig Harbor, which is just a few miles from the marina. Unfortunately, this park turned out to be quite underwhelming.

The park is an 11-acre natural area with wetlands. Rachel only ventured through a portion of the trail system, as most of the trail backed up to residential homes. She was a bit uncomfortable walking within 20-feet of open windows and decks of homes.

There are a good number of parks in Gig Harbor, and this is just the first that Rachel has explored. She will be making her rounds to the rest of the Gig Harbor parks in the coming weeks and hopes Mira will get to join her for some of these exploratory visits.



Rachel enjoys a lovely sunrise view from the Gig Harbor Marina.

The Spine Saga Continues

By Rachel Brandes

Houston, we have a diagnosis, almost. On Monday, April 4, 2022, Rachel headed to Seattle's Harborview Medical Center to see University of Washington board certified neurosurgeon, Fangyi Zhang, MD. She was on a mission for answers to her increasing back and nerve pain.

In late 2013 when Rachel ran her final half marathon, she began treatment to diagnose her increasing pain. She was eventually noted to have a disc extrusion at her L5/S1 disc space. A disc extrusion happens when a herniated disc bulges out of the disc space and into the spinal canal. In some cases, like Rachel's, it can compress the spinal cord or exiting spinal nerves, causing significant painful symptoms.

In 2016, after a lengthy time of conservative treatment and spinal injections, Rachel underwent a lumbar fusion. During the procedure, the surgeon placed what is called an intervertebral spacer through an anterior incision (the front of the body). This included the removal of the damaged disc, a bone graft insertion and closure with four screws. She was then flipped over, and four incisions were made, two on each side of the spine. Bone graft was placed, and four additional screws were placed. These bone grafts should have fused, which would have stopped the movement at that level and prevent back and nerve pain.

The nerve pain subsided a couple of weeks following surgery, but she never did get rid of the back pain and just came to live with it as a normal daily occurrence. In 2019 x-rays showed a partially broken screw on the back side. It would be mid to late 2020 when the nerve pain once again presented itself. By late 2021, the nerve pain became unbearable, and Rachel sought help. She began with a primary care physician, who prescribed her Gabapentin and ordered a CT scan. The Gabapentin significantly reduced the nerve pain and gave Rachel a tolerable level to live with. Due to insurance issues, the CT scan wouldn't be completed until February of 2022. Once that was done, Dr. Zhang would first review Rachel's records and current CT results before agreeing to take on her case. Thankfully, he did, and Rachel was scheduled for the April 4th visit. *The liaison* that assisted in coordinating the review of records and subsequent visit for Rachel was extremely kind and helpful during the process.



This image is a portion of the CT scan that shows the fractured screw.

Rachel was pleased with the entire experience at the clinic. Dr. Zhang and his physician assistant, who examined Rachel before she met Dr. Zhang were both impressive and very thorough. Rachel was shown the imaging from her CT scan during the visit and the source of her pain was explained.

Long story short, the front of Rachel's fusion did show solid bone growth where the anterior spacer and bone graft was placed. This was a huge relief to Rachel, as the anterior portion was the most difficult to recover from in the months following her procedure. On the back side, it would be a different story. The broken screw now appeared to be in two pieces, and there was no fusion of the facet joints at L5/S1 bilaterally, also known as pseudarthrosis. Therefore, there was enough movement for the screw to fracture and an answer to all of Rachel's symptoms.

What is a facet joint? A facet joint is the connection between the bones of the spine. Our nerve roots pass through the facet joints. When healthy, they provide stability, and the ability to bend and twist. When there is a problem, symptoms include burning nerve pain, muscle spasms, muscle weakness, pins-and-needles sensation, stiffness, aches, and instability. Rachel has each of these symptoms.

What is next? Rachel gets to travel to Seattle again on Monday, April 25th for a fun filled day of testing. Her day will start in the nuclear imaging department to prep for a bone scan. This will involve an injection of a tracer into her system. She will then have to wait for two hours for the tracer to concentrate in the bone tissue and return for the actual scan, which will last 60 minutes. This test will provide the surgeon with more detailed account of the facet joint and nerve damage. After the bone scan, Rachel will have an MRI done. This 45-minute test will provide the surgeon with more information on a likely L4 disc herniation, as Rachel's exam showed not only deficits at the L5/S1 level, but now also the L4 level. Rachel will then go straight to a visit with the surgeon for a discussion on the extent of the damage and almost certain surgical planning.

Rachel is anxious to have a resolution to her pain. An update will be provided following the April 25th day of testing. Until next time, be well.

Today is... April 11th

National Pet Day

On this day in 1970...

Apollo 13 Launched- Two days later an oxygen tank exploded, leading to famous expression, "Houston, we've had a problem here." The mission to land on the Moon was aborted. The crew was able to overcome limited power, loss of cabin heat, shortage of potable water, and the need to make makeshift repairs to the carbon dioxide removal system and return safely to Earth six days later.

Quote of the Week

"Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out."

- John Wooden

MIRA'S PHOTO OF THE WEEK



Propagated Coffee Plant

Meet the newest edition to the plant family residing on Rachel's windowsill. She is now trying her hand at propagating her plants. Fingers crossed.



Rachel Recommends

New Netflix movie *The Bubble* by Judd Apatow. [Watch the trailer.](#) If you enjoy an absurd comedy, you may enjoy this one. *The Bubble* is a ridiculous take on a group of actors filming a movie during the early days of the pandemic. In Rachel's opinion, Judd Apatow is a comedic genius. He has a long list of movies under his belt; one more laughable than the next.

Did you find it?

Merriam-Webster's Word of the Day
April 10, 2022

Liaison

A *liaison* can mean "a person who helps organizations or groups to work together and provide information to each other" or "a close bond or connection."