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## Thankful People: Woman learns to appreciate simply walking

Thursday, November 27, 2008  
By [Rudi Keller](#) ~ Southeast Missourian

Carol Guard can walk to the mailbox.

That may not seem like a big achievement for someone who was used to walking up to six miles a day for exercise, but for much of the past five years, Guard, a 40-year-old mother of two, has struggled to go just a few steps. Much of her time was spent in a wheelchair or in bed.



AARON EISENHAUER  
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After surgery in February, Carol Guard, here with her husband, Perry, is thankful for the ability to walk.

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By January of last year, back pain along with numbness in her legs forced Guard to give up working as a tax accountant. A series of doctors, both in Cape Girardeau and St. Louis, ordered tests. Guard estimates she endured eight MRI scans and four or five electromyography, or EMG, tests without a clear diagnosis.

An EMG involves inserting a needle into muscle tissue to test for electrical activity. "It is a medieval torture test," Guard said.

She was preparing to visit a doctor in Columbia, Mo., for more tests when that physician was injured in a car wreck. Instead, she went to Dr. Paul Tolentino in Cape Girardeau, and a different test -- a myelogram -- discovered that bone was growing into her spinal canal.

Surgery followed in February, with Tolentino removing the bone growth, fusing two vertebrae and putting it all back together with six rods, screws and cross bars. "I was instantly able to walk again," Guard said.

Guard's husband, Perry, is a nurse at Saint Francis Medical Center. They live in a home surrounded by woods near Hopper Road with her son, Mikey Gordon, who is a sophomore at Central High School. Her daughter and son-in-law, Michele and Aja Reutzel, have an 8-month-old daughter Kaitlyn, and everyone will be on hand for Thanksgiving dinner today.

"I can't do the turkey, but my daughter will help, and we will all be together," she said.

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The surgery put her on her feet again, but Guard said the leg numbness -- a sign of peroneal nerve palsy that was diagnosed before the bone spurs -- and some pain remain. But those symptoms come and go, she said, and she loves not being trapped in the wheelchair.

"I never knew how -- I am only 40 -- how precious walking is," Guard said as she explained why she is thankful. "I never knew that I took that ability for granted until I lost that ability."

Guard had multiple medical issues that made her diagnosis difficult, Tolentino said. The back problems that resulted in the spinal fusion operation are a sign of early arthritis, he said. Before the surgery, Tolentino said, he cautioned Guard the degree of improvement she would see was difficult to predict.

But it was Guard's determination to improve that helped put her back on her feet, Tolentino said. "That is the most rewarding part of the job, when you meet a motivated patient who wants their life back and who can achieve that for themselves."

More surgery could be in her future and the nerve damage may never be reversed, Guard said. But those issues are for the future. She's happy to have recovered some of the day-to-day functioning that pain had denied her.

"Going out and getting the mail is huge," she said.

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