



FINALLY, A LIFE WITHOUT PAIN

YOUNG MOM FINDS RELIEF
FOR BACK PAIN



“IT’S KIND OF NICE TO BE ABLE TO GO TO MY KIDS’ GAMES AND NOT BE IN AGONY AFTER SITTING ON THE BLEACHERS.”
—MELISSA REED

At age 30, Melissa Reed was beginning to think back pain would be a permanent part of her life. Since she was 22, she had had to endure varying levels of discomfort in her lower back. Physical therapy sometimes helped, but not for long.

“When my back would ‘go out,’ it was bad,” says Melissa, a Fontana, Wis. resident and mother of three who owns an insurance agency with her husband. “I would be sweating and I couldn’t move.” She took her concerns to her primary care physician, who did not find any problems upon examination. But Melissa’s pains grew progressively worse until she started feeling a constant numbness in her toe and on the side of her foot.

In 2009, after Melissa’s brother was hit by a car, she spent every day for nearly two weeks with him at Mercy Hospital and Trauma Center in Janesville. During that time, she talked to her brother’s trauma surgeon about her problems, who told her she should see Christopher Sturm, MD, neurosurgeon with Mercy Health System.

She eventually did see Dr. Sturm, who showed more concern for her than any other doctor she had met. “He actually listened to me and talked to me about how my back pain was affecting my life,” says Melissa. According to Dr. Sturm, the two bottom discs (structures that act as cushions between vertebrae) in Melissa’s spine had dried out and collapsed. The collapsed discs had caused her nerves to compress, which was why Melissa was in so much pain all the time.



Melissa needed spinal fusion surgery, and Dr. Sturm was her first choice to perform the surgery.

“Back surgeries have this stigma,” she says. “There are a lot of people who tried to talk me out of it, because everybody knows somebody for whom a spinal fusion surgery didn’t work. But I researched Dr. Sturm. He has a really high success rate for spinal fusions.”



From left, Melissa Reed’s children Ian Garreau and Madeline Reed play a game at home with her husband, Tom Reed.

A SUCCESSFUL SURGERY

Melissa's back pain had become nearly intolerable by 2010, and she was ready for surgery in November of that year. However, she had to go through six months of insurance discussions before she was finally able to undergo surgery in May 2011. "It was horrible," she says. "When you have three kids and a job and you hurt all the time, it's really depressing."

In May, Dr. Sturm performed a two-level posterior lumbar interbody fusion on Melissa. During the surgery, he removed bone to completely decompress the nerves and removed the two worn-out discs. He replaced the discs with special spacers, which were packed with bone to reestablish the normal disc space height and to get the spine to fuse in this normal position. The vertebrae were further held in place with implanted rods and screws.

"The main objective of the surgery was to decompress the nerves, thus relieving Melissa's leg pain," Dr. Sturm says. "We also needed to reestablish normal anatomic alignment—and make sure it stayed that way in an effort to improve her back pain."

After her surgery, Melissa didn't start feeling better right away. But three or four weeks later, she was feeling much



Clockwise from front, Lucy Reed, 9; Madeline Reed, 4; Ian Garreau, 11; Melissa and Tom Reed and their dog, Trigger, pose for a family portrait outside their home in Fontana, Wis.

better and was even able to walk around the block. She worked from home for four months and officially came back to her office in early fall. "It was a long road," she says. "Unless you've been through it, it's hard to understand that."

Now, almost all her pain is gone. "In the mornings I'm stiff," says Melissa, who is now 32. "But most days I'm feeling pretty good. It's kind of nice to be able to go to my kids' games and not be in agony after sitting on the bleachers."

In his years as a surgeon, Dr. Sturm says he has learned that X-rays and other imaging tests do not necessarily tell physicians everything they need to know about what is going on inside a patient. "We're in the profession of

taking care of people, not pictures," he says. "A large part of identifying problems is talking with and examining the patient. Melissa said she was in tremendous pain, so I did what I could to help her. I had to have faith that what she was telling me was correct. And it was."

For Melissa, Dr. Sturm's attitude made all the difference. "He changed my life," she says. "I don't know where I'd be right now if I hadn't been able to have the surgery."

To make an appointment with Dr. Sturm or another Mercy Health System neurosurgeon, call (608) 756-6826.