

Debbie Banahasky, Chiari Class of '82

Meet Debbie Banahasky. Debbie responded to our request for good news stories and surprised us with a twist. Debbie was diagnosed and had surgery over 20 years ago!

She graciously agreed to share her story, so that others may realize that Chiari isn't always as bad as it seems...

How did you come to find out you had Chiari?

When I was just getting my job - I was about 18 - I had to get an eye test. When the eye doctor looked at my eyes he said, there's something going on in there, you need to see a neurologist. So I saw a neurologist on and off for probably 10 years. They finally said we don't know what's going on and they sent me to the head of neurosurgery at a local hospital. He put me in the hospital for about a week and did tests and he found it [Chiari].

Do you remember what tests you had? Did you have an MRI?

Actually, I was one of the first MRIs in the city. I'm kind of an antique. That was early in 1982.

Were you surprised when he found something? Were you having any symptoms?

The only symptoms that I was aware of was that I had a lot of trouble seeing at night to drive. People told me when they looked at me that my eyes jiggled back and forth, but I didn't feel that. They did test me originally for MS.

What did you think when they told you it was Chiari?

I guess because I was young and I'd never heard of it, I just trusted the doctor and said do what you gotta do. I was more worried about them shaving my head.

Do you know why he recommended surgery if you didn't have a lot of symptoms?

I don't know. I didn't ask any questions and I didn't have anyone to talk to about it at the time.

So the decision to have surgery was an easy one?

Yes, here's how he put it. He said you can have surgery or you can leave the hospital and be in a wheelchair ten years from now. So for me there was no decision. I didn't even get a second opinion.

Did you have a syrxinx?

No. And I had an MRI not too long ago, I still don't have one. I never developed one.

What was the surgery like, was it pretty much the same as is done today?

I'm pretty much cut from the top of my head to the base of my neck. They did a laminectomy on C1, C2, and C3. I never actually heard the word duraplasty, but he told me when he got in he would decide whether he would use something artificial or material from my own body.

How did he characterize the surgery for you? Did he say it would be traumatic?

He said it would be uncomfortable...he didn't even come close!

How long were you in the hospital?

I was in Intensive Care for 3 days and in the hospital for 10 days all together. I didn't have any complications.

Was your recovery quick?

I was off work for about 3 months. Didn't have any kind of physical therapy. He just told me to learn to turn my neck myself. Turn a little bit to the right, to the left. At that point I never thought I was going to move my neck again! I didn't even think, gee they may be cutting my nerves. I didn't really think about it.

How are you doing today?

Actually, pretty good. Every now and then I get headaches. They think I have complicated migraines. But I've only had two of those spells over the past 10 years. Sometimes I get shortness of breath or swallowing problems. I don't know if it's coming back.

How often do you get MRI's?

I just had them when I was having the headaches. Not on a regular basis.

Do you consider yourself lucky?

Definitely. I know I had it from birth. Looking back, when I was little, I can remember running around outside and coming in and telling my Mom I had a headache in the back of my neck. Of course back then she just said go lie down you'll be fine.

Does anyone else in your family have Chiari?

I think my one sister might. She's 70 so she's not going to get it checked out. She has balance problems and headaches and a lot of the things I had. And my Mom always complained about pain in her neck and her head.

What would you say to someone who has just been diagnosed?

I think you have to go with what you feel, get a doctor that you trust, and trust things will work out.

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