

Every step is a miracle

"Miracles don't happen every day." We've all heard that expression so many times, we're pretty much conditioned to thinking that the only place miracles do happen is in the movies—that is, every holiday season on 34th St.

But, when it comes to the subject of miracles, 26-year-old Melissa Martinez is a true believer. There is no doubt in her mind that a miracle has graced her life. And, when you see the smile on her face and the confidence in her step, she'll have you believing in them, too.

Her miracle is having the ability to simply walk without pain or assistance. While it sounds easy enough, there was a point in her life not too long ago when she wondered if she'd ever be able to stand up straight or move from here to there without a walker or crutches. The pain in her hips was so excruciating that being able to stroll leisurely around the block with her young son in a stroller wasn't a dream—it was an impossibility.

Melissa owes her miracle to the surgical procedure known as staged bilateral hip replacement. And, her miracle worker is orthopedic surgeon, George Verghese, M.D.

"My surgery was the miracle of all miracles," she enthuses. "Thanks to Dr. Verghese, I have gone from years on crutches, being pushed in a wheelchair and unable to stand up straight to life as it used to be. Now, I get up and go—without thinking, without pain. It's a tremendous gift. I lived with pain in my hips for so long, I just marvel that it is truly gone. That's the miracle."

Melissa's medical problems surfaced when she was a senior in high school. She was a varsity cheerleader and active in several sports and many school projects and events. But, she was constantly ill and "always ached all over". Eventually and after abandoning her favorite activities, she was diagnosed

with lupus, a chronic, inflammatory, autoimmune disease. Lupus is a type of arthritis that affects the joints, skin and other organs.

"I battled the worst of the worst with this illness. It led to problems with blood pressure, leaking valves, swelling of the pericardium (sac around the heart), seizures, migraines, kidney failure and dialysis."

To help manage the pain and inflammation caused by lupus, she began taking prednisone, a prescriptive corticosteroid medication. It took the better part of a year until she began to feel better and "normal" again. "Finally, I felt healthy. I even started jogging," Melissa said.

Slowly, though, she began experiencing pain in her hips. Over time, it intensified so dramatically, she was incapacitated and unable to put any pressure at all on her legs. X-rays and MRIs revealed that Melissa had avascular necrosis of both hip joints or AVN due to prolonged use of prednisone.

AVN is a disease that results from the temporary or permanent loss of blood supply to the bones. Without blood, the bone dies and collapses. This disease is also known as osteonecrosis, aseptic necrosis or ischemic bone necrosis.

Although it can occur in any bone, AVN affects the ends of long bones most commonly, such as the femur (bone extending from the knee joint to the hip joint). Up to 20,000 people are diagnosed with AVN each year. Generally, it affects people between the ages of 30 and 50.

The amount of disability that results from AVN depends on what part of the bone is affected and how large an area is involved. Over the course of AVN, the healing process is usually ineffective as the bone tissues break down faster than the body can repair them. If left untreated, the disease progresses to the point where the

bone collapses, and the joint is destroyed, causing severe pain, stiffness and deformity.

Loss of blood supply to the bone can be caused by an injury or by risk factors, such as medications including steroids, or by excessive alcohol intake. Studies show that long-term systemic corticosteroid use is associated with 35 percent of all cases of AVN and that it is more likely to affect both hips (when occurring in the hip). In Melissa's case, the tissue in the ball of her hips had died and collapsed.

Melissa spent two-and-a-half years in constant pain and dependent completely on assistance to walk. There were even times when the pain was so horrific that she could not stand or put pressure of any degree on her hips and spent days in bed curled in the fetal position for relief. She was seen by several physicians and at Chicago hospitals "who only seemed to be able to provide temporary fixes to alleviate the pain."

The miracle began when she consulted Dr. Verghese. "When I met Melissa, she was crouched over and almost squatting all of the time. She couldn't stand up straight and was in unyielding pain. Her condition is not uncommon as a result of a steroid regime to manage lupus. She had reached the point that her only choice for relief was to replace both of her hips," said Dr. Verghese.

Bilateral hip replacement, he explains, is a painful procedure that can result in significant blood loss.

Due to Melissa's problems with renal failure, Dr. Verghese's plan was to replace her left hip and allow several days before surgery on her right hip.

However, due to the stress of the first surgery, Melissa's second procedure was delayed for several weeks. Dr. Verghese, who completed his fellowship in joint replacement at Harvard,

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used high-density plastic hips for her surgery, which occurred at Provena St. Mary's Hospital in Kankakee. "In Melissa's case, they have the potential to last a lifetime," he says.

Her recovery from the second procedure was quicker and dramatically less stressful. And, the results are indeed a miracle. "It's strange to look in the mirror and see myself standing so tall and straight. The surgery allowed me to start living my life again. I can walk

and stand pain-free," Melissa beams.

Dr. Verghese will follow Melissa's recovery and progress on a long-term basis. Her case, he points out, is testament to the fact that the highest medical technology, skill and nursing care are available right here in the community, "eliminating the need to travel outside of the area."

These are the types of miracles, he says, that happen in Kankakee.