

Spinal fusion surgery enables Broadway dancer to resume cherished career



After undergoing two spinal fusion surgeries, professional Broadway dancer Stephen Ward Billeisen returned to dancing with minor limitation to his flexibility.

When professional Broadway dancer Stephen Ward Billeisen started suffering from chronic back pain and bilateral leg pain as a result of a long-lasting spinal deformity called spondylolisthesis, he realized he needed to see an expert on spines in order to continue to his dancing career.

Billeisen headed to the New Jersey practice of NYC Spine Surgery PLLC to undergo the care of Dr. Daveed Frazier, a world-renowned expert on minimally invasive spinal fusions who has worked with professional athletes in the past.

"His symptoms were 100 percent relieved by surgery after suffering for several years with this problem," Frazier says.

Before proceeding into surgery, Frazier exhausted all other therapy options, including physical therapy, chiropractic treatment, acupuncture, anti-inflammatories, muscle relaxers, nerve medications and narcotics and even endured steroid injections under the care of pain management doctors, all over two years.

"Surgery was only recommended after the conservative measures failed," the doctor says.

"The pain got to be intense by the time I had surgery," Billeisen says. "The discs had deteriorated enough that I could not walk more than two city blocks without having to stretch out the muscles or sit for a few minutes for the nerves to calm down."

Since Billeisen had lower back pain and evidence of spinal instability, a spinal fusion was needed. Spinal fusion is when the doctor fuses together two or more vertebrae so that they can heal as one solid bone. This abolishes movement between the vertebrae as well as stops the elongation of nerves, ligaments and muscles.

"The surgery worked by opening up the space available for the nerves by removing the arthritis and replacing the injured disc between the bones," Frazier explains. "This not only helped with his pain, but also put his spine in a better posture, which makes him less likely to develop other problems in the future."

These types of spinal fusions are not the typical option. Harvard-trained Frazier is one of the world's experts at this procedure. Frazier has heavily researched minimally invasive spinal fusions and even has patents on several devices that are used the around the world.

After the surgery, Billeisen says he "couldn't have been more thrilled to no longer have the pain running up and down" his legs.

Twisting, bending, lifting and turning is limited for four to six months after surgery. "It takes that long for the bones, bone graph and bone marrow to grow the three vertebrae together," Billeisen says. But after full recovery of a year, according to Billeisen, he was able to return to dancing, and was able to jump and lift other performers with only a minor limitation to his flexibility.

That was nine years ago. Billeisen suffered an accident at work that unfortunately caused him to develop another spondylolisthesis that represented the same back and leg pain he had previously. According to Billeisen, a 10-minute tap number in "Anything Goes" prompted the disc beneath the fused vertebrae to disintegrate, because it began taking the weight of his movement.

Frazier again recommended extensive conservative therapies and Billeisen underwent them for a year this time, but after they failed again, Frazier conducted another spinal fusion.

"A new procedure once again relieved all his symptoms," Frazier says.

"This was a much less-involved surgery than the first one — far less constrictive, so I feel somewhat normal in my movement," Billeisen says.

After both minimally invasive spinal fusions, Billeisen was able to leave the hospital within less than 24 hours and "noted immediate relief of his new pain and weakness," Frazier says, stating that Billeisen was able to walk within a few hours of surgery, was able to immediately walk up and down stairs, and was able to walk more than a mile a day four weeks after surgery.

"After having been in practice for 20 years after and specializing in many of these less-invasive techniques for over 14 years, I've mastered these procedures and the proof is in my patient's outcomes," Frazier says.

And Billeisen is living proof, stating that his life had a dark cloud over it when he was in constant pain, especially since his career is dependent on agility.

"After the healing process and the physical therapy, life is full and free and easy ... I feel like I have my life back," Billeisen says. "I work very hard at what I do and my body and my health is imperative to my performance."

"I have several goals when I perform minimally invasive spinal fusions," Frazier says. "I'd like my patients to be pain-free, able to return to their normal activities and an active lifestyle without taking heavy pain medications. Stephen achieved all three of these."

"Now twice I have had the pleasure of having Dr. Frazier in my corner helping me on my journey. Most people would have called it quits after a back surgery of that magnitude, but I was under the best care," Billeisen says, just three weeks after his second spinal fusion. "And I will not quit!"

Patients can find more information about minimally invasive spinal fusions by visiting www.newyorkcityspine.com.

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