

Stephanie Smith

\$5,000 WINNER

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I spent the last ten years in a lot of pain because I had a herniated disc in my neck. I went so long without people knowing about my pain because I'm one of those people that tries to keep going and make the best of it. I've always felt like, if you have a negative attitude, you'll have a bad day — so you should stay positive. I tried to do that for a long time, but it got to a point where it hurt to do anything, even leave the house. My husband is super active, so we have a room with a stationary bike and a treadmill. He would always invite me to join him and walk on the treadmill while he rode the bike, but I could never say yes.

In December, my doctor told me I needed an anterior cervical discectomy and fusion.

I knew I needed surgery, but I was scared because there are risks involved. I was kind of scared that I was going to be paralyzed from the neck down. They tell you all the risks and you're like, "Oh no, that won't be me." But in the back of your mind, you're thinking, "That could be me."

My daughter is an RN in the neurosurgeon pod where I actually had surgery, so she's normally there in that operating room.

Having her take the day off to be there with me, I could see her getting a little emotional too. And with her knowing the risk, I started crying because I was like, "I've got to be there for my kids." I've got a two-year-old grandson and I want to be able to be there for him. My son is fixing to graduate from college and go off in the army and be an officer, and I want to be able to go see him wherever he's stationed and not be afraid that I can't fly because I'm in a wheelchair.

When the surgery was over, I felt so blessed that I wasn't in pain anymore.

I was so happy — but then at my 12-week post-op appointment, I stepped on the scale and I was shocked. Even after seeing the number, it didn't really hit me how much weight I had gained until I got home and I got the email from my doctor with my patient visit summary in writing. I looked at that number and I just knew that now that I didn't have the excuse of my pain anymore, I had to make a change.



That day, my husband was riding the bike in our exercise room while watching a movie on the wall, and I went in and started watching with him. And suddenly as I'm sitting there, I thought to myself, "Why the heck are you sitting here? Go put your tennis shoes on and get on the treadmill." I got up and that was that. I was done with the excuses, and I just started walking.

Now, I'm finally able to go see my 97-year-old grandfather now who lives six hours away.

Being able to get active again changed everything for me. My grandpa raised me since I was ten years old so he's more of like a dad than a grandpa. We went to go see him for Valentine's Day, and I drove the whole way there and I wasn't in pain. In the past, just driving was painful for me. But on that drive, I was so excited. I was like, "I'm not in pain! My leg's not asleep. I don't have pain shooting down my arm."

My husband and I are growing old together, and I want us to enjoy our time.

We love exercising together now while watching something — or sometimes we go outside and pull weeds or take the dogs for a walk. Now that I'm not waking up in pain anymore and spending the night tossing and turning, I have more energy to spend time with my family and I'm finally able to do what I couldn't do before. I'm so grateful. I can't wait to go see my grandpa next and give him a hug.



THRIVE