Getting Her Groove Back

PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF AS CARTILAGE REPLACEMENT PUTS DARNICE PERSON BACK ON THE DANCE FLOOR AND BACK INTO LIFE

By Sandi Constantino-Thompson

Two steps forward. One step back. For Darnice Person of Matthews, NC, that’s more than a song lyric or dance move. It defines the repair and recovery of knee defects that literally swept her off her feet and prevented her from enjoying life to the fullest. Five years and multiple surgeries later, Darnice proves no medical problem or setback can keep her down.

Originally from Whiteville, NC, Darnice ranks among the hardest-working women in America, managing two jobs, a family with two sons, an active social life, and evening classes to earn her masters degree in healthcare administration. A former Wells Fargo mortgage specialist and credit/collection analyst for the American Red Cross, Darnice also provides national disaster relief when needed. Over the years, she has volunteered for numerous events including Hurricane Katrina. “I love working with Red Cross clients,” she asserts. “It’s so important to let people know we can help and won’t judge them because of events beyond their control.”

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However what truly defines Darnice is her joyful spirit and passion for dancing, “anywhere, anytime” she says with infectious enthusiasm. “I love to get my groove on to any kind of music. But in 2010, I started noticing that after dancing, my knees hurt. I figured I had torn my meniscus and decided to go to OrthoCarolina. That’s when I met Dr. Piasecki.”

An MRI showed that Darnice had a benign tumor behind her left patella (knee cap), the result of a joint disease called pigmented villonodular synovitis (PVNS), which precipitates cell overgrowth in the joint lining (synovium). Dr. Dana Piasecki recommended she visit Dr. Joshua Patt of CMC Orthopedic Surgery who successfully removed a two-inch growth. Yet, when Darnice returned for a follow-up appointment, Dr. Patt noticed her knees remained unstable.

“After surgery, my right knee felt like Jell-O, but I figured it was overcompensating for the left one,” Darnice assumed. “My knee cap would pop in and out of place, and I had trouble bending down.” Dr. Patt told me to go back to Dr. Piasecki, because he was one of the best orthopedic sports surgeons around.”

A second MRI revealed that over time, the cartilage in Darnice’s right knee had disintegrated, causing severe pain which made daily activities excruciating. Dr. Piasecki and his team felt the best long-term solution would be to reinforce the knee with Carticel® autologous cultured chondrocytes. Carticel cultivates a patient’s own natural cartilage cells so they can be implanted into a damaged joint.

The only FDA-approved natural cartilage replacement method at the time, Carticel necessitated a lengthy insurance approval process. Referring to her surgeon with a pet name known by many, Darnice says, “Because I’m so active, Dr. P knew that natural cell replacement would be my best option. He was wonderful in helping me get approved, and he kept me informed every step of the way.”
In December 2011, Darnice had Carticel surgery and began her lengthy recovery. “I had no idea what I was getting into,” she says with unexpected glee. “I have a really high pain threshold, but after the surgery, I was surprised how much my knee hurt. Dr. P gave me such great mental and physical support, and he said that if it helped, some people are worse. I told him, ‘I’d like to see them if they’re worse!’ Now we just laugh about all that.”

Backed by invincible determination, Darnice started physical therapy within two weeks and by eight weeks, she was riding a bike and using resistance weights to strengthen her leg. After three months, she was back at work and eager to hit the dance floor. “Darnice is a fantastic patient,” notes physical therapist Damien Gutierrez of OrthoCarolina in Matthews. “She keeps things fun and is very optimistic and motivated. Everyone loves her!” Darnice teases, “I love him, too—even if he does torture me.”

Yet despite diligent physical therapy and an 80% Carticel success rate, Darnice’s body was not generating enough healthy cartilage to supplement the implanted tissue. Subsequent arthroscopic surgery to remove excess scar tissue and inspect cartilage surfaces confirmed the implanted cells had not thrived, and the team needed to consider another treatment. To compound the setback, Darnice’s knee instability had initiated intense hip pain. “Beyond the imagination, and much worse than my knees,” she recalls. “My right hip hurt every time I moved.”

She grimaces. “I thought the only other option would be joint replacement. But Dr. P said I was too young for that, and he wasn’t giving up on me. He suggested we try a new product called Denovo®.” Similar to Carticel, the Denovo method implants small sections of natural cartilage grafts secured with fibrous glue. Because the edifice provides more stability at the time of surgery, new cartilage usually forms within six weeks.

Now that an alternate protocol had been decided, the real challenge began—encouraging Darnice’s insurance company to authorize a second procedure. “It took so long to get Carticel approved, I didn’t think Denovo would be as bad,” she recounts. “But it took years, not months, to get certified! OrthoCarolina had to fight so hard to get approval for me, but they did it.”

“Denovo is much newer than Carticel,” Dr. Piasecki explains, “therefore its clinical results are less well-known. Insurance companies are reluctant to approve it because there are not as many long-term studies to prove its efficacy.” He continues. “But with Denovo, the cartilage being implanted is more like normal cartilage than the Carticel cellular graft. In other words, the Denovo graft relies less on new cartilage developing over time.”

After nearly three painful years, Darnice received approval for the Denovo technique and Dr. Piasecki performed surgery in August 2014. First, to alleviate pressure on the inside of her knee, Dr. Piasecki performed an offloading osteotomy of the tibia, adding a metal plate for support. Next, the team performed an OATS (osteoarticular transfer system) procedure to transfer cartilage tissue from a healthy part of the knee to the weaker section. Denovo was then used to strengthen the remainder of the damaged joint.

Studies have shown that combining osteotomies and cartilage surgeries (like OATS and Denovo) demonstrates superior results for repairing cartilage defects. Dr. Piasecki summarizes, “The combination of the three techniques can be a very powerful option when an approach like Carticel has failed.” This time, the procedure worked like a charm.
“I could immediately feel a difference in my knee,” Darnice affirms. “It was easier to bend with far less pain.” Within days Darnice began light physical therapy, followed by six months of workouts with Damien and ongoing sessions with personal trainers Rory Maxwell and Brian McClendon at Core 6:19 in Charlotte. She’s also easing back onto the dance floor, adding her three-year-old nephew Keynia to her dance card and bestowing him the honor of her first dance.

“Before surgery, I had to wear a brace just to walk around. Now I feel like I’m walking on air,” she effuses. “I love Dr. Piasecki and OrthoCarolina so much that I want to work for them! I’ve been in the healthcare business for a long time, and OrthoCarolina treats patients the way they should be treated. I’ve referred several co-workers and friends to Dr. P, and they all like him as much as I do.”

She continues, “Dr. P is a great doctor because he really cares about his patients. In fact, he makes me think I’m his only patient! My husband, Brice, works as an orthopedic rep, but I didn’t mention that because I wanted to see how OrthoCarolina would treat a patient without connections. And Dr. P and the entire staff have been awesome from day one.”

Dr. Piasecki returns the compliment. “Darnice is a very special person and one of my all-time favorite patients. She’s fun-loving, has a great attitude, and her long-term prognosis is excellent.” Darnice smiles in approval. “I told you he was a sweetheart! You need someone like that in your corner when you have orthopedic surgery.”

For a brief moment, she reveals a more serious side. “Hopefully, my experience with Denovo will help other people get the procedure sooner. But either way, anyone who has a major knee procedure needs to get their mind focused and have a good support system. My family, my girlfriends, my mother-in-law—they all helped tremendously. Yes, the surgery will be painful. But afterwards, you’ll be so happy you did it. Next time I’m on the dance floor, I know I can say a little thank you to OrthoCarolina.”

Since this article was written, Darnice made good on her word and accepted a position at OrthoCarolina Ballantyne. So glad to have you on board, Darnice!