

My rehab journey with Saba: my hand therapist—Debbie Honore

The Fall - September 30, 2010

At 5:45am, I went for an early morning walk in my neighborhood. The sun had not come up yet, and the walk felt great with the cool air in my face, and the music playing on my iPod. I was walking at a pretty fast pace in the middle of the street, since asphalt is much softer than cement sidewalks (also, less of a chance to trip over uneven pavement or those sticker balls that fall from the trees). About 30 minutes into my walk I noticed car lights behind me, so I proceeded to move from the street to the sidewalk. As I was crossing over a driveway, the top of my shoe caught on the lip of the 1-inch curb and I went tumbling down onto the sidewalk. I tried to catch myself, but was not successful. Every gadget I had on me went flying everywhere – my iPod, earphones, cell phone, and hand weights. I felt my entire left arm begin to tingle and go numb and just wanted to get home to ice it! I realized after trying to stand up that I wasn't going to be able to walk the 2 blocks to get home.. I felt nauseated and sick to my stomach. I wondered why my left sleeve of my jacket had come off, so reached over with my right hand to put it back on. That is when I totally freaked out. My arm WAS'nt in the sleeve. It was just hanging there, and I couldn't feel it. All of a sudden, I felt this excruciating pain in my left shoulder and hoped I wasn't having a heart attack. I laid down on the lawn and hoped the pain and my nausea would go away. Someone across the street was getting into their car so I called for help, but they did not hear or see me. I knew that I had to find my cell phone fast. I crawled to the edge of the lawn and found it on the driveway. Thank goodness the streetlight was there and the phone battery hadn't fallen out. I called my fiancé who eventually found me, and drove me to the hospital.

ER and Initial Diagnosis

I stumbled into the ER with full vocals stating that I needed drugs. About one hour has now passed since my fall. The attendant told me there was one person ahead of me and that it appeared I had a dislocated shoulder and understood my pain. Nothing seemed to ease the pain.. Extra pillows, different body positions, absolutely nothing! All I could do was cry and yell for drugs! Well, finally I was given something, but it wasn't strong enough. My hand was starting to swell up and they removed my ring just in time! I remember my daughter coming in and I told her I needed them to get me something more. I guess they had to wait for an ER doctor to authorize the morphine.. Finally, right before x-rays were taken, I had my morphine drip! Still felt pain during every film they placed behind my shoulder. This was a crazy day!!! They rolled me back into the ER and a doctor finally showed up in person and said my shoulder was dislocated about 4-1/2" away from where it normally is. He could pop it back under a local anesthetic or put me to sleep. My daughter just looked at him and said one word, "Sleep"!! When I woke up from the procedure, the pain had finally subsided. However, I couldn't feel anything in my left arm. Everything was numb and tingly all the way down to my fingertips. The ER doctor's diagnosis was "Anterior dislocation of left shoulder and Neuropathy of left radial nerve." He gave me a Vicodin prescription for pain, along with wrist splint and shoulder sling. I iced the shoulder for 20 minutes every 2 hours for the next 3 days until seeing my orthopedic surgeon.

Orthopedic Surgeon

I arrived at my appointment with a totally flail arm. I had mild pain around the shoulder, and could not lift my arm, move my elbow, wrist, or fingers. The Orthopedic surgeon diagnosed me with "severe brachial plexopathy involving radial, median, musculocutaneous, axillary, and ulnar nerve". A fairly rare injury. He told me I was at risk for having permanent nerve damage. There is a 66% chance of near normal recovery and it can take one to two years. He started me on a Medrol Dosepak (steroids) to diminish swelling around the nerves of the brachial plexus. I will also need an MRI and EMG to determine the severity of nerve damage. Therapy was also advised to maintain mobility of the left upper extremity. He highly recommended I go to a place called "Hands-On-Care" in the Almaden Valley and see a therapist specializing in the shoulder elbow wrist and hand and since I named "Saba". At first, I wanted to stay closer to home, but he said "if anyone can get your arm better, Saba can! She is one of the best therapists for your injury". And so, it begins. The LONG road to recovery.

Hands-On-Care "Therapy" and "Certified Hand Therapist"

When Saba first examined me, she took me over to the table to lay down. I kept telling her not to let go of my arm, or it would fall. I had to learn to trust her, but I was SO scared, since the arm was very sensitive even though it was numb and tingly. The first thing she did was test the strength in my arm to see what I could do. She told me that I did not want to get muscle atrophy or contractures, so she needed to move and massage my arm for me. Today, however, she would focus more on taking arm measurements to make a special custom



brace called airplane splint for my brachial plexus injury to prevent further traction on the nerves. It was huge, and took me a long time to learn how to put it on. She finally marked it like a "dot-to-dot" puzzle with a black sharpie pen. It worked much better after that!

It was during my 2nd and future appointments when I realized just how strict and serious Saba was at working to get my arm better. It was torture for me. I have very low tolerance to pain. She did massage to reduce the swelling from my hands to passive ranging to my shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand which were getting tighter from the swelling and disuse. The massaging of my numb and tingling forearm and wrist and every swollen finger and ranging all the parts of my upper limb was all done in one setting, my sessions lasted for 2 hours or more. But it made all of my other dozen clinic and home exercises easy! She told me my only job was to breathe while she was working on me. She said I was doing well and am making progress with the median nerve. She also noticed a bit of radial nerve response. I was able to slowly move the palm of my hand from back to front on a pillow. I got different braces as I made progress; some were made from the same material of the big splint as I progressed. At my sessions, I would ride my imaginary bike with my legs, or dance. I would sing aloud to distract myself from the table sessions. Since my granddaughter was 4 months old, I would practice all of the nursery songs. Saba liked "Itsy Bitsy Spider" the best! Saba had her own special humming skills too. After a few times, I knew exactly what she was saying, or wanting me to do or not to do! We really learned to communicate well.

As time went on, my arm got stronger. I worked on ranging to strengthening the shoulder, elbow and finally wrist and hand. I was using the arm bike, the pulley, and the weighted suitcase to straighten my elbow... The other patients would tease me about walking in circles to nowhere with that suitcase! Before I knew it, I was up



to 5 pounds carrying the suitcase! I did many different table and wall exercises. I would wash Saba's wall with a towel pretending to "wax on and wax off" which really helped to stretch my entire arm. I rolled and gripped therapy dough, and put colored pegs into holes on a board. At first, I would miss the holes. I could not even grip the pegs. They would fall out of my fingers. Saba would draw a black line on my palm and tell me to bring the

peg to that spot! Ha! Ha! Easy for her to say. Low and behold, I have now mastered the peg board! Now if I could only master the Velcro board. I've come a long way in 8 months, that's for sure!!

My elbow finally was able to stretch down flat with ranging, splinting and after MANY tears and therapy



sessions. The wrist was still stuck and so were the fingers. Saba made a dynamic extension splint at first for me which helped lift my fingers so I could use my hand. Later, she also ordered me a JAS wrist splint to help me to stretch the wrist. The wrist finally started moving again, but my knuckles were getting stuck and so she made me a static progressive finger flexion splint to bend the knuckles



which I wore but the fingers weren't giving in and it was going to take capsulotomy surgery to release the joints not only in my knuckles, but also in my ring and pinky finger middle joints as they were clawing due to the lack of ulnar nerve function.

Capsulotomy Surgery - March 22, 2011

My surgery went very well. The wounds healed nicely. They removed 52 stitches, which was no fun, but my scars are looking less noticeable each day. I continued immediately with intense therapy and can almost make a complete fist on my own now. It is better after the hand is dipped in parafin wax and warmed up! I remember



seeing Saba's other patients dip their hand in the wax, and couldn't wait until I could do that! Well, after 6 months, I finally got my wish.

June 4, 2011

Today, I still have no extension of my fingers, as the ulnar and radial nerves have not returned completely, I am able to do 2 lbs wrist curls both up and down, but I am still numb and tingly from the elbow down to my fingertips. There are signs of flickering in the nerves, so all I can do is wait and continue with my therapy twice a week with Saba and at home as well. I have come a very long way from having a flail arm to what I am capable of doing now. Saba has done SO much for my recovery this far. My orthopedic surgeon was right, I needed a certified hand therapist who specialized in the management of the upper extremity and My hand therapist "Saba is the best", and I am so glad I drove the extra 10 minutes to go to her. There have been alot of tears, pain, and agony, but as they say "no pain, no gain"! The next step, if my nerves don't return, will be "tendon transfer surgery", but I am hoping that my nerves return instead. I don't want to fight with the insurance companies either, on top of dealing with the injury I have to worry about the insurance bills, therapy coverage etc. Initially I had 20 visits/yr as blue cross only allows that in my plan and then had to stop due to lack of authorization by the insurance company as it was not post surgical, just a flail arm. After the surgery, the surgeon at Stanford who I saw later for my nerves had to submit a "Pre-Determination Letter" to them for additional hand therapy sessions. He asked for an additional 16 sessions (2x per week for 8 weeks) after my surgery, I am so afraid if I stop therapy, I will be in big trouble with my hand, even though I exercise regularly at home, its not the same.

It's amazing what can happen in an instant, and how that can change your life forever. Just a simple little walk. I do believe that everything happens for a reason, and although it's been a long and challenging journey these past 8 months, with insurance limitation, pain, therapy, surgery, dealing with the whole issue, I have been able to spend time at home helping with my family and watching my grandchildren grow. After many years as an executive assistant, and many long stressful hours, it's been very different being home. I am still getting adjusted and must remember to be thankful every day for the function I do have, thanks to the wonders of Saba, my certified hand therapist! She is tough.. VERY tough.. but without her, I might have never moved my left arm again!

