

# She sure has backbone

## Cutting-edge surgery gets Dracut woman back on her feet

By Hiroko Sato

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LOWELL — The brace around Barbara Williams' torso isn't exactly the latest fashion.

But she wears it proudly.

The bulky white brace protects the numerous screws and rods attached to Williams' spine. It's the brace she wore to the Pheasant Lane Mall in Nashua in February when she walked the entire length of the building for the first time in years. She wore it when she planted flowers in boxes this spring.

The brace is an addition to the fight she waged for so long against adult scoliosis that left her spine twisted around.

"I came here on a stretcher," Williams said, standing in a room at New England Rehabilitation Hospital at Lowell on Pawtucket Street. "I can't believe I'm walking. I'm awesome."

Williams, 68, of Dracut is living her life just as she used to after cutting-edge medical technology made it possible for her to

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stand on her own two feet again.

The technology involves a titanium cage containing genetically engineered protein gel that replaces spinal discs, many rods and screws, and cutting and opening the body from both front and back.

If that sounds scary, Williams agrees.

Seven years ago, when Mark Lapp, the founder of the Merrimack Valley Spine Center in Lowell, first explained how he'd open her stomach to recreate the foundation of the spine, Williams walked away.

"I said to myself, 'Oh, I don't think so,'" she says.

Today, she calls the procedure the best thing she has ever done — next to, of

course, marrying Francis, her husband of 50 years.

It's not the kind of surgery orthopedic surgeons perform every day. Lapp and his colleagues say he's the only one who does it in the Merrimack Valley.

But Lapp's talent turned out to be the gift of a lifetime for Williams, who slept in a lounge chair for a year and half in agonizing pain. Lately, she has been telling anyone who will listen: "Don't you ever feel like you can't do it."

Williams was born with scoliosis, but the curved spine never stopped her from living an active life. She danced, learned ballet and skated.

But about 20 years ago, while working as a nursing assistant at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Bedford, she started to realize that getting up from a chair wasn't that easy. Sitting for a while became painful, too.

After meeting Lapp seven years ago, she knocked on the doors of the pain clinic at Lowell General Hospital. The treatment worked well for three years. Then, she hit bottom. Walking was torture. Forget washing dishes. She'd go to just one shop per trip to the mall, and she wouldn't dare do it unless she was certain that a bench is nearby.

Then, she gave up part of what she loves to do the most — gardening.

"Last year, I resorted to window boxes," she says.

She remembers leaning against the brick wall as she pushed her way into a local clinic.



"Please, God," she recalls herself saying. "Please just get me to the door."

Lapp, who is also a partner at Orthopaedic Surgical Associates of Lowell, says Williams had no choice left but to have the surgery. He reconstructed the foundation of the spine in the first surgery in early December, then straightened the entire lower half of the spine by inserting screws and rods in the second surgery in early February.

"A piece of cake. A walk in the park." Williams says of the surgeries.

Following each procedure, Williams spent seven to eight days at the rehabilitation center. There, she learned how to lift her legs and walk again.

Simple tasks, like putting socks, on proved harder than going up and down stairs.

Nurses and therapists helped her bake brownies in a kitchen set up for transitional training and showed how to put dishes on the table without hurting herself. They did what a family would do for her, washing surgical stockings she left on the bed, bringing chocolate cake that she told them she missed. Their kindness and commitment to helping patients made her feel safe and want to push herself, Williams says.

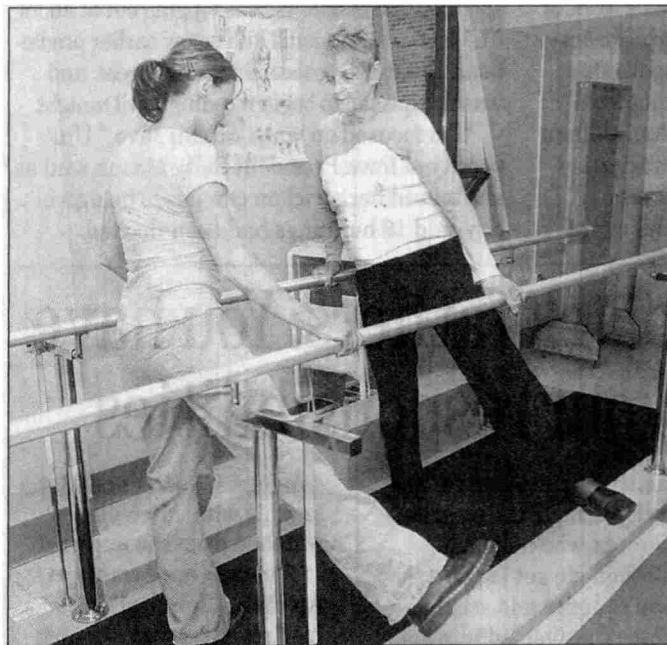
Elin Zgonis, a physical therapist at the center, said Williams' determination played a big role in her recovery.

"There is a lot of spunk to her," Zgonis said.

She walked out of the center without a cane or walker. And with that spirit, she conquered uterine cancer last month. Williams said she left Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston several hours after a hysterectomy and has

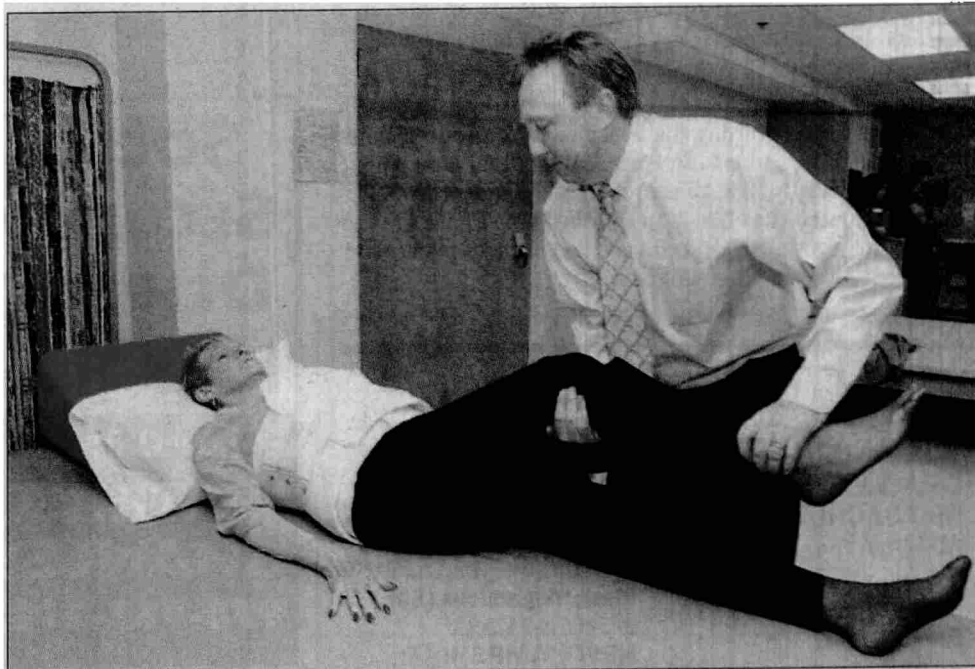
recovered quickly.

She is proud to say she can now look forward to doing what she wanted to do — planting more flowers and going to the Deerfield Fair in New Hampshire, which she enjoys each September.



Barbara Williams of Dracut, right, performs therapy with physical therapist Elin Zgonis of Lowell at New England Rehabilitation Hospital in Lowell. Williams underwent successful spine-reconstruction surgery in December.

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Dr. Daniel Lyons checks the mobility of Barbara Williams' leg at New England Rehabilitation Hospital in Lowell. Williams underwent spine-reconstruction in December at the Merrimack Valley Spine Center in Lowell after years of pain. Today, she's virtually pain-free. She called the procedure "a walk in the park." SUN/BOB WHITAKER

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