Singer Gloria Gaynor Details the Dangerous Surgery She Endured to Beat Chronic Pain

The “I Will Survive” songstress says she thought she was going to die.

June 11, 2019 By Alicia Green

In 1978, singer Gloria Gaynor fell over a monitor while dancing onstage during a performance. That accident changed both her life and her body. Gaynor tells People in an exclusive interview that as a result of that fall she suffered from chronic pain for four decades and underwent several surgeries.

Gaynor says she woke up paralyzed from the waist down the day after the accident. She walked again after having surgery that year to remove a ruptured disc and fuse two of the vertebrae in her lower spine.

Rumors soon spread at Gaynor’s record label that her career was over, but employees were in for a surprise. Gaynor made an amazing comeback with the 1978 hit single “I Will Survive.”

The song became a global phenomenon and made Gaynor a star. She followed the hit with nine albums during a span of 15 years. Then, in 1997, she braved surgery once more to correct spinal stenosis—a narrowing of the spinal canal that can lead to pain, cramping and more—caused by her first surgery. To stabilize the area, doctors inserted rods in the canal.

“But it made my back flat, which made me lean forward,” Gaynor said to People. “There were times when I had to sleep in a chair because I just couldn’t sleep lying down.” Throughout the years, her pain was so severe that she used periodic epidurals and prescription pain and anti-inflammatory drugs to manage the problem.

In 2017, Gaynor’s pain became so excruciating that she decided she couldn’t live like that any longer.

That’s when she reached out to Hooman M. Melamed, MD, FAAOS, a board-certified spine surgeon in Los Angeles. Melamed told her she was going to need an extensive and rare operation that required breaking and reconstructing her spine.

The first part of Gaynor's surgery took place in January 2018. At first, her high vital signs alarmed Melamed, but just five days later, he was able to perform part two of the procedure. The operation was successful, and both doctor and patient were ecstatic.

"I was walking bent over for 20 years," Gaynor said. "Right after the surgery when they got me up and I was walking up straight for the first time…it was incredible."

Today, the disco legend is 100% pain-free and, with the help of an instructor, even does Pilates regularly. She also plans to dance in heels on tour this summer.

Click here to read more about chronic pain.

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