

NEVER SUSPENDING HOPE

SURGEON RESTORES MUCH MORE THAN EYESIGHT

Sitting in their living room, Betty and Glen Willis joke as they share stories about their six decades of marriage and raising three daughters. Themes of faith, love and togetherness are woven throughout the close-knit family's narratives. Their church, friends, travel and Friday night family dinners figure prominently. "We've had 66 years of happiness, love, compassion and support — and that makes a family," says Betty.

Listening to their banter, you might not guess that Betty experienced a sudden and life-altering health crisis as a young mother living in Houston in 1965. Upon standing up after working in her garden one day, it was as though she were looking through Venetian blinds. Thus began Betty's nearly 60-year optical-health journey, punctuated by recurrent setbacks that would test the most faithful and fortitudinous of individuals and families, and by two remarkable highlights — both at Houston Methodist and decades apart.

The Willis family's first encounter with Houston Methodist was in the mid-1960s with Dr. Alice R. McPherson, a pioneering ophthalmologist and retinal surgeon who became one of the country's leading retinal disease experts of the time. While McPherson ordered several tests to determine the cause of Betty's severe retinitis, there were no conclusive results. When Betty's vision showed some improvement, the family moved back to their hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma, for a job opportunity.

But that progress was short-lived. After a few years, Betty's condition deteriorated to the point that her retinas were hemorrhaging. "One of my early memories of her condition was that she was always lying on her bed with ice packs over her eyes," recalls daughter Janet Luby.

"We sought out anything we thought could help, including traveling to Dallas, Miami and St. Louis, and we kept being told there was no hope," says Glen. Disheartened, he reconnected with Dr. McPherson at Houston Methodist.

Dr. McPherson recommended vitreoretinal laser surgery — unusual at the time — which had to be performed within 48 hours of stoppage of the bleeding. The family had to be prepared to travel at any time. One snowy morning in January of 1970, the Willises packed the car and made their way to Houston. The unrelenting blizzard forced them to stop for the night and miss Betty's surgical appointment. Deeply rooted in faith, the family prayed that night and awoke to clear roads to Houston. Upon their arrival, Dr. McPherson and her team were ready. Betty's recovery involved a month of hospitalization, which meant that Glen and their girls had to return to Tulsa.

With his strikingly sharp memory, Glen recalls how Betty had asked their daughters to "take care of him" and help out at home. On the drive back, they stayed at a motel. "When I awoke, Glenda — who was eight at the time — had her two younger sisters dressed and ready to go and had even made the bed," Glen recounts. He was in good hands.

A month later, the family picked up Betty, whose eyesight had been restored and who — under the caring direction of Dr. McPherson — had been pampered with beauty treatments at the end of her long hospitalization. The memory of that kind and powerfully meaningful gesture remains with Betty to this day.

The worst seemed to be behind them as Betty enjoyed a decade of stable vision. But once again, her eyesight began to deteriorate, and she underwent several treatments and surgeries over the next 20 years. Averaging one procedure every five years, Betty endured cataract removals and a vitrectomy that required her



Betty Willis, center, surrounded by daughters Glenda Jett and Janet Luby and husband Glen Willis

to remain face-down for three weeks. With only a sliver of vision through her left eye, Betty and Glen devised systems and routines to adapt to the situation and continue with their active family and social life. "She never, ever complained — she just knew what she had to do and did it," youngest daughter Beth Alexander points out.

In August of 2022, Betty had a fall that put her in the ICU at Houston Methodist The Woodlands Hospital. During this stressful time, the family was grateful for the support and kindness shown to them by the staff there, including a special moment spent praying together with a nurse. As she recovered at the hospital, Betty insisted that she would make it to her granddaughter's wedding three weeks later. Even in the face of yet another major setback, Betty was resolute about living a full life. Betty pronounces, "I was in a wheelchair, but I participated — and we got home at midnight!"

The fall resulted in a complete loss of the little vision Betty had left. Weary, the family was resigned to the likelihood that there would be no more clinical interventions available. Throughout her ocular ordeal, Betty and Glen had found ways to manage on their own, but now the couple's independence was in severe jeopardy. "We were afraid that this was going to be the end of the road for us," says Janet.

As a last-ditch effort, the family resolved to visit the Houston Methodist Blanton Eye Institute in February 2023. "When we went in, I was just praying for any help, no matter how small — just anything," remembers Glen. There, they met with Dr. Garvin H. Davis, a retina specialist who serendipitously had trained under Dr. McPherson 20 years earlier. Davis conducted tests and discovered — to Betty's delight — that her retina was stable but the artificial lens in her eye was displaced. Davis left the exam room only to return with his partner, Dr. Rahul Pandit, an ocular surgeon and the medical director of the ophthalmology operating room at the Institute. The two doctors dedicated two hours to Betty and her family.

The family was stunned as Dr. Pandit described a path forward for Betty, instilling confidence and conveying compassion they remembered from their experience at Houston Methodist 50 years earlier. Pandit's goal was simple — reposition Betty's dislocated ocular lens. The plan and the techniques involved were far more complex, entailing back-up contingencies, innovation and the kind of mastery shared by a relatively small community of ocular surgeons. Surgery on the front (anterior) region of the eye, known as advanced anterior segment surgery, is especially challenging because of the highly individualized structural variabilities of the eye and the innovation required to problem-solve. Pandit explains, "When it comes to repositioning lenses, there's no one right answer. It depends on how they're dislocated, what sort of structures are intact and what's available with the lens because lens design varies from person to person."

Because of the uncertainties of what he might face once the surgery was underway, Pandit's surgical plan involved alternate provisions. While there are tools and general techniques for these procedures, what was most critical was Dr. Pandit's ability to innovate based on Betty's particular needs. Put simply, the surgeon built "suspenders" to hold Betty's lens in place and made some adjustments to her pupil, periodically putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. After her surgery, Betty was thrilled and surprised by the improvement in her vision, which progressed virtually every day.

The surgery performed by Pandit restored much more than Betty's eyesight — it restored the couple's independence, and, in so many ways, the family's optimism. "When we walked in, she couldn't see a hand in front of her face; now she can read at 20/100," points out Glenda. Janet adds, "And now she can be safe in her own home."

Understandably, over the years Betty became wary of doctors, anxious that someone could imperil the little sight she had. "Mom was always guarded and not fond of doctors," says Beth. "To hear her talk about Dr. Pandit and the team so warmly and with a smile on her face — you'd never know it!" Remarkably, Betty never lost hope. A tenaciously independent woman, she values the support from her family and regards Houston Methodist's holistic approach to care and sincere compassion with fondness and admiration. Betty points out how attentive Drs. Davis and Pandit were, appreciating the input from "Team Willis" but also insisting on conversing directly with her.

While the results have been extraordinary, sometimes it's the ordinary things that are most striking. Glen recalls that a few weeks after the surgery, he was taken aback when Betty made a comment about the time. "She said, 'It's 9:15' — it's been years since she's seen that clock!" he shares, choking up.

Back at the Willis home, Betty treasures the gift of sight and is busy as ever. At her last visit, Dr. Davis told Betty he didn't need to see her again for a year, which was music to her ears. "Mama's a busy lady — we have to put a speedometer on this thing," jokes Janet, pointing to Betty's walker.

To the Willis family, the result is nothing short of a miracle — with a good dose of medical innovation and humanity. "It was like coming home," concludes Janet. "It's been such a blessing in every way for us to come back to Houston Methodist."