

“WILLS EYE SAVED MY VISION”

Kristy Lafferty finds unparalleled joy in seeing the faces of her three dogs, checking the time on her phone, and peering into her husband’s light blue eyes. “It makes me really emotional,” said Kristy, who for three decades has faced nearly insurmountable odds to retain her vision.

“I was not about to give up,” explained the 55-year-old who resides in Worton on the Eastern Shore of Maryland with her husband of 28 years, Todd Bramble. In fact, “never give up” is a motto she’s adhered to throughout her life.

“I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when I was seven months old,” said Kristy, dependent upon insulin ever since.

At 27, Kristy started having difficulty driving at night; her vision was becoming blurry. She visited an ophthalmologist in Maryland, who informed her that her retinas were hemorrhaging. He performed several laser surgeries to control the bleeding. Within a year, her vision started to worsen. “The surgery caused a lot of scarring,” said Kristy, who remembers the day things took a turn for the worse. “I was driving home over the Delaware Memorial Bridge. In a split second, I knew major things were happening with my vision.” The following morning, Kristy, accompanied by her mother, visited an ophthalmologist in South Jersey. “He told me I’d be blind in no time,” recalled Kristy, who wasn’t about to accept this as her fate.

Kristy was experiencing the debilitating impact of diabetic retinopathy, the most common cause of blindness in working-age Americans. It is caused by diabetic damage to the blood vessels of the light sensitive tissue at the back of the eye (the retina).

Kristy had to stop working. At the time, she and Todd, a long-haul trucker, lived on two-plus acres of land in Sudlersville, Maryland, surrounded by dogs, cats, horses, goats, and chickens. Her animals became a source of healing. She visited numerous specialists over the years and underwent operations to remove cataracts and repair detached retinas in both eyes. Her left eye eventually went totally blind. A silicone oil bubble that had been placed in her right eye caused her pressure to rise, and she developed glaucoma. Following another unsuccessful surgery, she decided to seek care at Wills Eye. “I knew they were the best eye hospital in the world,” said Kristy, a South Jersey native.

In January 2020, Kristy had her first appointment with Julia A. Haller, MD, Ophthalmologist-in-Chief and retina specialist. “I heard she was brilliant; I loved her as soon as I met her,” recalled Kristy, who felt the same about glaucoma specialist Reza Razeghinejad, MD (Dr. Reza). “He’s the most compassionate, caring man. I can’t say enough about either of them and all the nurses and medical staff.”

Dr. Haller explained that Kristy had end-stage diabetic retinopathy: “She was legally blind and what vision she did have was literally hanging by a thread. Surgery would



Kristy Lafferty (right), with her husband, Todd Bramble.

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—Kristy Lafferty

present risks, but we couldn’t just stand by and let her go totally blind in that eye too.”

In June 2020, Drs. Haller and Reza performed a complex, combined surgical procedure. Dr. Haller replaced the silicone oil bubble and removed tractional membranes that had formed over the retina, while Dr. Reza placed a valve shunt (drainage tube) in the front of her eye to control the pressure.

“My vision has been getting a little bit better every day,” said Kristy, whose regimen includes monthly injections of Avastin by Carl H. Park, MD, of the Wills Eye Retina Service in Wilmington, Delaware.

“Kristy is a remarkable woman,” said Dr. Haller. “She’s incredibly brave and resilient.

It’s a miracle that we were able to get her to this point.”

Kristy now wears special tinted, anti-glare glasses that help with her sensitivity to light. She navigates around her house with independent confidence. “I would not be where I am today without Drs. Haller and Reza,” she said. “They are amazing!”



Julia A. Haller, MD, presenting at a Wills Eye lecture.



Reza Razeghinejad, MD, holds up a valve shunt (drainage tube), used in surgeries to treat glaucoma.



The first **Wills “Eye on Diabetes” Day** took place on September 17. More than 70 community members, with scheduled appointments, received free diabetic eye screenings. The goal of the initiative is to identify and treat diabetic eye disease before it progresses to vision loss and blindness.