

By Mitch Talley

Mtalley@calhountimes.com

If only I could go back to the fifth grade for one day?.

That spring day in 1971 was one to which I had eagerly looked forward for years. It was the day the fifth graders ? including me - would be going on the annual trip to the Shrine Circus and Grant's Park in Atlanta.

Unfortunately, that trip to the circus came just one week too early for me.

While I did make the trip and remember having a good time, what I most remember is how I couldn't really tell what was going on.

You see, it wasn't until a week after that trip that I put on my first pair of glasses and realized just how terrible my vision had been to that point. The world was suddenly much clearer, and I wanted to see the clowns and elephants and trapeze artists again to see what I had missed.

Oh, I had really known I couldn't see well for a couple of years ? but was too shy to tell anyone that I couldn't see and too stubborn to want to wear those nerdy-looking glasses of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Instead, I just told my third- and fourth-grade teachers that I couldn't see the blackboard and needed to move closer to the front of the class.

Another concession to my poor vision came in 1977 when I was a gypsy in the Class of 1977's senior play, ?Dracula Baby.?

I was told by the director that I couldn't wear my glasses because they would cause a glare from the stage lights. Since I didn't have contacts at that time, that meant taking off my glasses, stumbling my way onto the stage and not really enjoying my famous (and only) line, ?Gypsies, the sun is going down; we must go indoors where it's safe!?

Even changing to soft contact lenses when I was about 19 or 20 meant making concessions to my eyes. Windy days quickly dried out the lenses and caused my eyes to be scratchy, and my vision was often slightly blurred after wearing the lenses for long periods of time.

But a lifetime of making concessions to poor vision came to a miraculous end for me in July.

That's when J. Bradley Randleman MD and his crew at Emory Vision in Atlanta changed my life forever ? the way millions of other lives have been changed nationwide thanks to laser vision correction surgery.

No one who has natural 20/20 vision can ever appreciate what a miracle it is to wake up and see the world around you crystal clear instead of in a fogbank.

But my fellow brothers and sisters who were cursed with ?bad eyes? know what a miracle took place on July 13, the day of my laser surgery.

I had read about the surgery for years but never had built up the nerve to do it until this year. I guess I was afraid I would be one of the small percentage of folks who couldn't be helped by the operation.

The first step ? and one that I totally detested ? was taking out my contact lenses three days before my initial exam and putting on those despicable Coke-bottle glasses that had haunted me practically all my life.

Leaving out the contacts was the only way to give my eyeballs time to change back to their natural shape, however, so that Dr. Randleman and

his staff could accurately put me through a battery of tests to make sure I was a viable candidate for the surgery and exactly how much correction I needed to see better.

It turned out that I was one of the 10 to 15 percent of people who can't undergo LASIK surgery because my corneas are too thin.

But Dr. Randleman quickly told me that I WAS a candidate for another type of similar surgery called PRK.

The difference between LASIK and PRK?

In LASIK, a flap is cut in the cornea and held back by a special gadget, then the laser is used to remove part of the underlying tissue to correct the vision.

In PRK, the top layer of the cornea is actually removed, the laser removes some tissue underneath, and a protective contact lens is placed on top of the eye for sevThe results are the same for either surgery: excellent vision correction for most people, though PRK takes longer to heal and see results.

My surgery was planned for July 13, two weeks after my initial screening. Three days of wearing those despicable glasses again preceded the surgery to make sure my eyeball had reverted back to its natural shape, but knowing that my days of wearing glasses and contact lenses were nearly over, kept me going.

Ironically, the surgery itself was a breeze. I lay down flat on the operating table, with my head in an indentation to hold it securely in place.

Numbing drops were placed in my eyes, and Dr. Randleman used a special brush to scrub off the top layer of my cornea. It sounds terrible, but it didn't hurt and all I saw was the brush heading towards my eye and then just white as he removed the cornea in the middle of my eye.

After the doctor and his staff carefully checked the numbers put into the laser machine, the actual removal of tissue from my eye began, and less than a minute later, the surgery was over and the protective contacts had been placed on my eyes!

In normal LASIK surgery, the patient usually sees almost-immediate results. By the next day, he is able to see much better since the only healing is the small area around the edges of the flap.

In my case, since the cornea had to grow back completely, the results weren't immediate, though as soon as I got up from the operating table, I could already tell that a miracle was beginning to take place.

My watch has three tiny circles that are stopwatches, and for years I hadn't really been able to read the numbers on them. On the way home, I could already read those numbers!

(I chose to have blended vision, which leaves one eye for close-up viewing and one eye for distant vision. I may have to wear reading glasses someday, but with the way laser surgery is advancing, this surgery may have bought me enough time for researchers to come up with a way for me to avoid that.)

Unfortunately, three rough days of recovery lay ahead for me. Somehow I managed to make it to work Thursday, the day after surgery, and helped put out the Saturday, July 16 issue of the Calhoun Times.

Friday, I came to work again, but my eyes were so sensitive that I couldn't stand to look at the computer screen and after only an hour on

the job had to go home, where I collapsed on the couch and didn't open my eyes for more than a few seconds at a time until the next day.

That's when I began to think maybe I had done the wrong thing, but fortunately a wife who finally told me Saturday I would never get any better if I didn't get out in the sun and open my eyes, started me on the road to recovery.

I heeded her advice and the whole family loaded up and went swimming in her dad's pool about 2 p.m. Saturday. I just sat by the pool but forced myself to keep my eyes open and by 5 p.m., the sensitivity and slight scratchiness of the past two days was gone.

I still was questioning my decision, though, because my distant vision was still not good, even after the protective lenses were taken out on July 20, seven days after my surgery.

However, on the morning of July 21, eight days after surgery, as soon as I woke up, I knew that the miracle was complete!

"I can see! I can see!" I yelled to Cindy as I danced around the bedroom, taking a break to look out the window at our neighbor Jimmy Payne's house. It was crystal clear! I had never been so excited in my life to see a house.

The days since have been full of constant amazement that without the use of glasses or contacts, I can actually see! Sometimes at night, I still think I need to take out my contacts because it's hard to erase nearly 30 years of following that routine before going to bed.

Admittedly there are very slight risks associated with laser vision surgery, and I would advise anyone who is considering the surgery to do their research and find the right doctor for them.

All I know is that for me, it has truly been a life-changing moment so grateful to the countless scientists, doctors, and researchers who

have worked diligently for years to make this dream come true for me ? and millions of my fellow brothers and sisters who thought their eyes were failures.

Now if I could just go back to the Shrine Circus and my senior play one more time?.

Mitch Talley  
Managing Editor  
Calhoun Times