

Diagnosis **NPH**

NPH mirrors symptoms of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease but has a much better outcome.

By Lisa Beyer

In 2007, **Longwood** resident **Alicia Harper** was 73 and living an active life in retirement, involved with her church and family, when she began having problems walking and often felt confused. Though it was gradual, her illness progressed to the point where she could not care for herself. Within three years, she was bedridden.

A diabetic, Harper kept in touch with her specialist throughout her ordeal, was referred to a neurologist and was initially diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease—and prescribed medication.

"The medication did not help and as time went on, I was even worse," says Harper, a mother to four adult children. Her neurologist eventually decided that she might have Normal Pressure Hydrocephalus (NPH), a neurological disorder resulting from the build-up of cerebrospinal fluid.

By 2009, Harper was living in a nursing home where she could receive the care she needed. Her doctors were not convinced Alzheimer's was the problem, and they referred her to **Dr. Phillip St. Louis**, who heads Florida Hospital's Neuroscience Institute.

Dr. St. Louis has treated NPH for almost 30 years, using an accepted procedure that involves placing a shunt in the brain to drain excess fluid and relieve pressure in the skull. However, the procedure is not without risk and the doctor worried that if a patient was misdiagnosed, it would be useless.

He spearheaded the NPH Program at Florida Hospital, which now sees about 100 patients annually, to determine if they are good candidates for the shunt procedure.

"I want to make sure that a patient has NPH before we put them through this surgery," he says. "If they do have this disease, the surgery can make a major impact on their life and allow them, and their family, to return to normal."

For Harper, the diagnosis was clear: she would benefit from surgery. However, it took a few months



Alicia Harper, with husband, Nildo, was relieved to find Alzheimer's diagnosis wrong.

COURTESY OF HARPER FAMILY

before she and her family could make the decision to go through with the risky procedure.

Husband **Nildo Harper** says the changes were "dramatic." "Her surgery was in October 2009 and her recovery has been amazing," he says. "She plays piano again, she's going to church and we can travel."

Daughter **Marggie Pittman** believes her mother has regained most of her abilities. "It was baffling and frustrating to watch her decline because she was so active and the organizer in our family. In the nursing home, she was almost incommunicative, but after her surgery, I could tell just by a phone conversation that she was on her way back."

“Talking about this illness gives me chills, because I realize how this surgery can change someone's life.”

For Harper, the whole experience remains foggy. "It happened gradually and I didn't really feel sick, or feel much at all," she recalls. "I wasn't aware of what was happening most of the time."

Fortunately, she received the correct diagnosis and treatment. "Life is pretty good now," she says. **L**

To find out more about the signs of NPH, visit our website at CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.