

A determined son, a generous doctor help her to see again

By PHIL GALEWITZ

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Marilyn Rosen woke up in February 2006 unable to see clearly. Her vision was clouded by cataracts caused by diabetes. For most people, cataracts are not a big deal and easily corrected in a simple outpatient procedure. But Rosen, 63, didn't have health insurance and couldn't afford the \$6,000 procedure to restore her vision. As Rosen spent month after month searching for help, her vision steadily worsened. It got so bad, she could no longer drive and had to severely reduce her work doing medical transcription for doctors.

As Rosen sought to find a doctor and surgery center willing to discount its price for the surgery, her son, Seth, was a soldier serving in Iraq.

When Seth came home from Iraq last December, his mother couldn't see him get off the plane because she had become legally blind. Seth Rosen was mad. He contacted veterans' organizations and medical groups, trying to find a doctor who would perform the surgery. In July, Rosen, of Wellington, found Dr. Steve Spector, a West Palm Beach ophthalmologist who agreed to waive his fee for the operation.

In August, Spector removed the cataract in Rosen's left eye and inserted an artificial lens that restored her to nearly 20/20 vision. She will have the same



Dr. Steven Spector and Marilyn Rosen

procedure done on her right eye this fall. "Her son is fighting for our country. This is one way to say, 'Thank you,'" Spector said. Rosen said she's thrilled with the results. "I can see the TV, I can see myself in the mirror and even read the Jeopardy! clues," she said. "I couldn't be happier."

No. 1 cause of blindness

Diabetes is the No. 1 cause of adult blindness in the country. People with diabetes are 60 percent more likely to develop cataracts. They also tend to get cataracts at a younger age, and the cataracts progress faster. In addition, diabetes causes glaucoma and retinopathy, a condition in which high blood sugar levels from diabetes lead to damage of the retina. The number of patients with diabetic-related eye diseases is expected to triple from 7.1 million cases in 2005 to 21 million cases in 2050.

Rosen was first diagnosed with type 2 diabetes during a routine medical exam in 2004, but she acknowledges she didn't always watch her diet. "I was in denial," she said. In May 2005, she was rushed to Palms West Hospital in Loxahatchee. She was diagnosed with ketoacidosis, a condition that can lead to diabetic coma or even death. In ketoacidosis, the body produces dangerously high levels of ketones, metabolic byproducts that build up in the blood. They appear in the urine when the body doesn't have enough insulin. Ketones can poison the body. They are a warning sign that diabetes is out of control. Rosen doesn't remember anything from her week in the hospital. She was told she nearly died. Luckily, her husband's medical insurance from his job at Office Depot was still in effect.

But shortly after her discharge, her husband, Allen, was laid off from his customer service position during a downsizing, and they lost their coverage. Allen now works as a security guard for Wackenhut Corp., but they can't afford the company's health insurance coverage, which costs more than \$550 a month. Without insurance, the costs quickly mounted for her diabetes.

The test strips for her blood glucose meter: \$60 a month. Her medications, including insulin: \$200 a month. All together, Marilyn spends \$300 a month for medicine and supplies, which includes \$16 syringes and \$2 alcohol swipes.

Signs easy to ignore

She thought she was doing well, until her vision problems began.

After doctors diagnosed her cataracts, she was told it would cost \$2,760 for the eye doctor, \$200 for each new plastic lens, \$2,000 to the surgery center and \$500 for the anesthesiologist. And the money had to be paid up front. It was money the Rosens didn't have.

In order to watch TV or use a computer, she had to sit within inches of the screens. She couldn't cook meat because she could no longer see whether the food was cooked thoroughly.

Rosen said she should have recognized the signs of diabetes earlier, but they were too easy to ignore. The first symptom seemed positive: unexplained weight loss. Her weight dropped from 195 pounds to 145 pounds even though she was still eating "junk" and not dieting.

Rosen also had gestational diabetes when she was pregnant with Seth 24 years ago. That condition increases the risk people will develop diabetes. Even after she was diagnosed with diabetes, she would still sneak candy bars and ice cream. Now, she said if she cheats, she has a spoonful of ice cream instead of the whole bowl.

She still does not exercise regularly, other than taking her dog for short walks. "I do have regrets, but I sure enjoyed eating those candy bars when I was doing it," Rosen said.

