

+ The Eyes Have It

AFTER 41 YEARS, BOTH SUSAN'S EYES CAN SEE AGAIN.

Dateline: Inner-city Philadelphia, 1969. Nixon is president, Vietnam is going badly, racial tension is in the air, and a bunch of giggly white kids in a VW are headed home after seeing *Midnight Cowboy*. Among them is budding artist and college sophomore Susan Sigel (nee Shay) 19. They decide to take a shortcut through a rough part of town. "We'd just come back from Woodstock," she recalls, "and I guess we thought everyone was full of peace and love."

Not so much in West Philly. A passerby throws a glass bottle through the windows of the car, showering glass everywhere. Blood is pouring from Si-

gel's right eye, its cornea lacerated by a shard.

Fast forward to 2010: It's been a 41-year odyssey of pain, frustration, and false hope for Sigel. First, there was a cornea transplant. It didn't work. Since then, there have been 13 unsuccessful surgeries. For years at a time, she gave up, waiting for technology to advance. But inspired by her brother, a successful lawyer, who, ironically, had lost an eye as a child, she, too, succeeded, as a monocular graphic artist.

But that was before she'd met GBMC ophthalmologist Dr. Sudeep Pramanik. Though trained in the U.S., he had studied difficult eye cases in India, where surgeries

considered unusual here abound because of the huge population. And with the advance of stem-cell and transplant technology, those surgeries had become old hat for top eye surgeons at the two Indian hospitals where Pramanik teaches for a month each year. ("They save the most complicated cases for me," he says with a laugh.)

Sigel, now married and living on the Eastern Shore, learned of Pramanik a year ago from a local ophthalmologist. Now 61, she hesitantly made an appointment with—yes—another eye doctor.

"I told him right away that I had lost all faith in eye doctors," she recalls.

But Pramanik, 36, eased her apprehensions. After an exam, he saw the original cornea transplant had been rejected, but that all the nerves were there for vision to be restored.

A combination of a partial cornea transplant (from a donor), stem cell therapy, and advanced contacts has given her back the nearly perfect vision that a beer bottle stole in West Philly 41 years ago.

The healing has been emotional, too, especially regarding her faith in medicine. "I believe anything Pramanik says is true," says Sigel, almost

surprising herself. "And he never patted himself on the back.

"I remember when his associate at GBMC, Dr. Brett Levinson, a lens specialist, made a final fitting for hybrid contacts for my new cornea, I wandered through the halls and into the glass lobby like I was watching a 3-D movie. I felt like I was in a fun house. There was an extra dimension to everything I hadn't had since I was 19."

And what's she going to dress up as for Halloween? "I'm thinking of going as an eye chart," she says with a laugh.—KI

Left: Dr. Sudeep Pramanik and Susan Sigel at GBMC.

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Dr. John Emmett, an oral surgeon at St. Joseph, is—along with his wife, pediatric dentist Dr. Margery Hernandez—a professional body builder, and has won several titles, including Mr. Maryland Masters Champion.