



# MedStar Georgetown MD



**After successful spine surgery with Dr. Voyadzis at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital, Dr. Nahed El Kassar is back to work and her hobbies, completely pain free.**

Photo by Hilary Schwab

## **Minimally invasive, robotic spine surgery a life-changer for area physician.** By Karen Hansen

As a physician, Nahed El Kassar, MD, has been trained to cast a critical eye on all things related to medicine. As a patient, she understands the experience of entrusting one's health to someone else's hands. For both these reasons, she chose the spinal surgery team at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital—not once, but twice.

In 2010, Nahed was a patient at MedStar Georgetown due to pain she was having after a car accident. Neurosurgeon Jean-Marc Voyadzis, MD, co-director of the Center for Minimally Invasive Spine Surgery at MedStar Georgetown, performed a

successful cervical fusion in her neck. Years later, after pain related to an L4-L5 spondylolisthesis (a spinal disorder in which a vertebra slips forward onto the bone below it) afflicted her lower back and left leg, she knew that she wanted Dr. Voyadzis to treat her again.

This time, not only did her minimally invasive, robotic spine surgery lead to a successful outcome, the entire experience compelled Nahed to write to the hospital and share, "What made my experience positive was mainly the high level of care,

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## **Advanced breast cancer surgery enables a young law student to follow her dream.** By Jennifer Young

Grecia Nuñez was on her way to attaining the American dream. Her parents had come to the United States from Mexico to create a better life for their children. Grecia was the first in her family to go to college. But this independent, spirited young woman did not stop there. Determined to make a difference in the world, Grecia moved to Washington, D.C., to pursue a law degree.

But in her second year of law school, while home for winter break, the trajectory of her life suddenly

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**Diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer at age 29, Grecia Nuñez is grateful there is no evidence of cancer after treatment at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital.**

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# After two liver transplants, she's focused on helping other transplant patients.

By Susan Walker

Soon after 26-year-old Prince George's County resident Tiara Hobert-Tolson was born, she was diagnosed with biliary atresia, a rare condition that causes a blockage in the tubes that carry bile from the liver to the gallbladder. The blockage can cause serious damage to the liver and, if left untreated, can lead to death. The treatment is a liver transplant, so when Tiara was almost a year old, her own mother donated a portion of her liver so her daughter could get the transplant she needed.

But by 2008, Tiara's liver was failing again. She had gotten mononucleosis, so the immune system-suppressing medications that protected her transplanted liver had to be reduced until she recovered. One side effect of reduced immune suppression can be organ rejection.

"Tiara had the classic symptoms of liver failure when I first saw her when she was 11," says MedStar Georgetown University Hospital pediatric transplant hepatologist Stuart Kaufman, MD. "She underwent a successful second liver transplant, receiving a full liver from a deceased donor, and is a healthy young woman today."

**"Balancing the care of a liver transplant graft with the usual life challenges of a 20-something is no easy task. We help shoulder the burden to allow these unique patients to live as close to normal lives as possible."**

—Arul Thomas, MD

Choosing a transplant center that performs a high volume of liver transplants has a significant impact on outcomes, which is especially important for people having a second transplant. Explains Cal Matsumoto, MD, MedStar Georgetown transplant surgeon, "Second transplants are generally much more difficult than primary transplants



**Tiara Hobert-Tolson, now a successful entrepreneur with her own business, had two liver transplants as a child and is using her personal experience to help support other patients as they navigate their transplant journey.** Photo by Charles King, C King Media

because of the scar tissue and the fact that people are extremely ill. It makes the surgery, anesthesia, and post-op care more difficult, so an experienced team is essential."

As Tiara grew older, her care was transitioned to Arul Thomas, MD, an adult transplant hepatologist at MedStar Georgetown. "We have a pediatric to adult transition program that addresses the unique challenges patients like Tiara face as they enter adulthood. We work closely with our pediatric colleagues to share care and knowledge. Balancing the care of a liver transplant graft with the usual life challenges of a 20-something is no easy task. We help shoulder the burden to allow these unique patients to live as close to normal lives as possible," says Dr. Thomas.

Thanks to her second transplant and ongoing care from the transplant hepatology team, Tiara is healthy and focusing on her goals. She's a busy entrepreneur with her own line of plant-based haircare products,

a passion she discovered when she was in the hospital after her second transplant.

"My family would bring me dolls and I would spend all day styling their hair," she remembers. "It gave me a real sense of peace and happiness while I was recovering."

In addition to her business, Tiara also established a non-profit, the Royalty Transplant Foundation. By leveraging her personal experiences, she aims to offer mental and emotional support to patients and their families. Sharing her story and providing essential resources could significantly help many people navigate the challenges of their transplant journeys.

"I'm here to inspire and uplift those in need of healing and help people learn about liver transplant. It helps to see someone who's been through what you're going through and is healthy and living their life. If you trust God and the doctors and embrace the journey, there's a life-changing reward at the end of the process," Tiara believes.

Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Transplant](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Transplant) to learn about our liver transplant program at MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute. To schedule an appointment with one of our specialists, call **202-444-3700**.

The new  
**Verstandig  
Pavilion is  
open and so  
is a world of  
possibilities.**



Photo by Silver Ridge Productions



Thirty-two private exam rooms in the ER. Photo by Silver Ridge Productions



Spacious waiting rooms throughout the facility. Photo by Silver Ridge Productions

The **Verstandig Pavilion** is a new world-class facility where our renowned medical experts and specialists will continue to provide you with the same exceptional quality of care you know and trust at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital.

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- **Modern and expanded** Emergency department (ER) nearly doubles our capacity to care for patients
- **32 individual exam rooms** providing privacy for patients
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To learn more and watch our video about the new Verstandig Pavilion, visit [MedStarHealth.org/WorldclassCare](https://www.medstarhealth.org/WorldclassCare).

## Following partial knee replacement: quickly recovered and fully functional. By Karen Hansen

William "Bill" Courtney, 79, of Washington, D.C., leads a vibrant life. He served as U.S. Ambassador to Georgia and Kazakhstan, is a senior fellow at the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit think tank, and is a frequent news commentator. His other passion? "For a half century I played tennis. It was a significant part of my life," says Bill. "But I overdid it a decade ago and tore a meniscus." After living with pain and limping for 10 years, he knew it was time for surgery. His doctor recommended Kenneth Vaz, MD, hip and knee orthopaedic surgeon at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital, part of the MedStar Orthopaedic Institute.

So, in 2021 Bill joined the growing ranks of Americans (800,000 per year) who undergo knee replacement surgery. However, Bill chose a somewhat uncommon approach: a partial knee replacement.

**"The care was first class, and MedStar Georgetown is really the best hospital in the area."**

—Bill Courtney

Bill's choice was understandable given the benefits of a partial knee replacement. Its recovery time is just four-to-six weeks versus six-to-12 for a total knee replacement. Bill reports that he was walking hours after surgery, and that his pain only lasted a day or two. "I did have a crutch," says Bill. "But after a day or two, I didn't need it. Since surgery my knee has been wholly without pain and is fully functional."

According to Dr. Vaz, the partial procedure is less invasive. "Compared to total knee replacement, it requires a



**After years of knee pain, Bill Courtney underwent a partial knee replacement at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and was thrilled to be walking just hours after surgery.** Photo by Hilary Schwab

smaller incision. You don't have to do as many bone cuts. There's also lower opioid usage, a better range of motion, and half the risk of heart attack, stroke, or infection." Because the bone, cartilage, and ligaments in the healthy parts of the knee are preserved, many patients report that a partial knee replacement feels more natural.

To be a candidate, a patient's disease must be limited to one of the three main knee compartments. "While only 3% to 5% of knee replacements performed in the United States are partials, a much larger percentage

of patients may be a reasonable candidate for the procedure," explains Dr. Vaz.

That may be due to a common misconception. "In the past, partials have gotten a bad rap for having higher revision rates, that is, needing to be redone," says Dr. Vaz. But things are changing. "One large study followed patients for 15 years, and the revision rate between the two was not significantly different. Even when redone, the outcomes of the revision of a partial are much closer to a first-time total knee replacement compared to a revision of a previous total knee."

Dr. Vaz performs multiple knee replacements on a weekly basis, including partial knee replacements. He hopes that the procedure becomes more common for patients and surgeons. He saw the benefits regularly when training with some of the world's foremost experts on the procedure.

Bill appreciated Dr. Vaz's frankness. "He explained everything properly, and it worked out just as he said. He was great." Bill was also confident in his team. "The care was first class, and MedStar Georgetown is really the best hospital in the area."



### Meet Kenneth Vaz, MD



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Vaz](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Vaz) to watch Dr. Vaz discuss knee replacement surgery.

MedStar Georgetown University Hospital is part of our MedStar Orthopaedic Institute, with 50 orthopaedic surgeons at 19 locations throughout Washington, D.C.; Maryland; and Virginia. Visit [MedStarOrthopaedicInstitute.org](https://www.MedStarOrthopaedicInstitute.org) for a complete listing of physicians and locations.

To learn more about our orthopaedic specialists at MedStar Georgetown, visit [MedStarHealth.org/MGUHOrtho](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/MGUHOrtho), or to make an appointment with one of our orthopaedic specialists, call **202-444-8766**.

# Our mothers deserve better: Raising awareness and support for maternal mental health.

By Jennifer Young

Bringing a baby into the world is often considered a time of blissful joy. However, the reality for many women (1 out of 5\*) is much darker. Rapid changes to her body, hormones, and lifestyle, combined with sleep deprivation and isolation, can cause a new mother to feel depressed, anxious, or even hopeless. Recent studies show that death by self-harm is the leading cause of death for women in the first year following pregnancy.

**The 24/7 National Maternal Mental Health Hotline is free and confidential:  
1-833-TLC-MAMA  
(1-833-852-6262)**

“Mental illness is the single most common complication of pregnancy,” explains Aimee Danielson, PhD, founder and director of the Women’s Mental Health program at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and co-chair of the DC Metro Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative.

“I’ve personally observed the far-reaching negative impacts of mental illness on mothers’ physical health, intimate relationships, and connection with their baby.”



The good news is maternal mental health conditions are temporary and treatable. Here in the Washington, D.C., region, the Women’s Mental Health program at MedStar Georgetown is at the forefront of supporting women during the perinatal period by providing specialty outpatient treatment for perinatal mood and anxiety disorders (PMADS) during and after pregnancy. Services include psychiatric evaluation, individual and group psychotherapy, couples therapy, reproductive psychiatry consultation, and medication management.

“The impressive work of Dr. Danielson and her team is a critical step in addressing the maternal mental health needs in our area and beyond. The comprehensive approach of her program provides the highest level clinical services while training the next generation of specialized providers, advancing treatment through academic research, and driving positive change through advocacy and community partnerships,” says Lisa Boyle, MD, FACS, president, MedStar Georgetown.

“Women can and do get better with treatment. We hear stories every day of how our services improve lives, but the need continues to outpace our capacity,” says Dr. Danielson.

“Dr. Danielson’s program provides invaluable services and support. However, critical gaps remain in the continuum of perinatal mental health services available for women in our community and the District of Columbia, where maternal mortality is at an all-time high. It is important we continue to raise awareness and build support in order to reach more women,” adds Tamika Auguste, MD, physician executive director for the Women’s Health service line at MedStar Health.

Our community continues to be a source of support and inspiration. In May, during Maternal Mental Health



**Aimee Danielson, PhD, founder and director of the Women’s Mental Health program at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital and co-chair of the DC Metro Perinatal Mental Health Collaborative.** Photo by Gary Landsman

Month, a group of community members, clinicians, and advocates gathered to help raise funds and awareness for the Women’s Mental Health program.

One community member shared, “My daughter was the last person you would think would take her own life. Having access to specialized perinatal mental health services could have made all the difference for her. I don’t want another family to lose their loved one to postpartum depression. That is why I support expanding the work Dr. Aimee Danielson is doing to provide more access to treatment for women like my daughter.”

“Women with perinatal mental health conditions are our sisters, daughters, nieces, friends, and neighbors,” says Dr. Danielson. “We are committed to providing solutions that prioritize the health and wellbeing of mothers so they can care for themselves and their babies while creating loving, stable, and healthy families in our communities.”

\* World Health Organization

To learn how your support can make a difference, please call **202-444-0943** or visit **MedStarHealth.org/Support**.

## Minimally invasive, robotic spine surgery a life-changer for area physician.

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**Before having spine surgery, Dr. Nahed El Kassar was nervous. She appreciated that Dr. Voyadzis listened to her concerns and tried more conservative approaches first; she never felt pressured to have surgery.** Photo by Hilary Schwab

professionalism, and compassion of MedStar Georgetown associates. I had zero anxiety. I felt like I was home.”

According to Dr. Voyadzis, Nahed’s underlying condition was “one of the most common degenerative conditions that we see as neurosurgeons specializing in the treatment of spinal conditions. She developed a shifting of one of the bony vertebrae on top of the other called a ‘spondylolisthesis.’” What was uncommon was the method chosen to treat it: a minimally invasive laminectomy and fusion, performed with robotic assistance.

“The traditional way of doing this operation is essentially an open surgery,” explains Dr. Voyadzis. This requires “making a sizable scar along the middle of the back; detaching the muscles to expose all the bony elements; fusing the bony vertebra by inserting screws and titanium rods; and then repairing the damaged disc. At MedStar Georgetown, we have the capability to do that same surgery in a far less invasive way and with greater

accuracy. This offers patients a much easier recovery,” he says.

MedStar Georgetown was the first hospital in the city to perform minimally invasive robotic spine surgery.

Nahed’s entire surgery was done with just two one-inch incisions. “We create a little working portal through the muscle fibers, without detaching the muscles or making a long scar,” explains Dr. Voyadzis. A robotic arm helps to guide the placement of screws with a very high level of precision. Plus, the robotic arm’s built-in imaging capability virtually eliminates the need for X-rays during surgery—saving the patient and the team from radiation exposure.

Most important, minimally invasive spine surgery has a faster recovery time, with less pain and lower rates of post-operative bleeding and infection. “Immediately after I awoke in the recovery room, I knew the surgery was a success,” says Nahed. “I had no pain in my left leg. I was

smiling!” She was discharged after less than 48 hours.

Nahed is thrilled her surgery was a success, but adds she appreciated that Dr. Voyadzis tried more conservative approaches first, including physical therapy, medications, and steroid injections.

“Dr. Voyadzis listened carefully, explained all the pros and cons of each option, and made sure that the decision was shared with me,” says Nahed.

Now pain free, Nahed has resumed her normal activities, including her work as a medical researcher at the National Institutes of Health. Looking back, she says that “usually, pain is a solitary experience. During the entire experience, I didn’t feel alone. This helped me recover fast, and I was pain-free three weeks after my surgery.”

**“We have the capability to do that same surgery in a far less invasive way and with greater accuracy. This offers patients a much easier recovery.”**

—Dr. Jean-Marc Voyadzis

After two positive experiences, she says, “I will not hesitate to return to MedStar Georgetown.” But if she does return, she will find even more reasons to feel confident. “We already have top physicians and outstanding nurses,” says Dr. Voyadzis. “And now we have the new Verstandig Pavilion, with 156 private patient rooms, 31 state-of-the-art operating rooms, and much more.”

Visit [MedStarHealth.org/SpineCare](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/SpineCare) for more information or to schedule an appointment, call **301-856-2323**.

## Advanced breast cancer surgery enables a young law student to follow her dream. *continued from page 1*

changed when she felt a small, hard lump in her right breast.

"I knew women get cysts that aren't serious, so I wasn't worried at first, but it felt different, so when I got back to school in February [2022], I made an appointment with my Ob/Gyn, Marian Wulf-Gutierrez, MD, at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital [now retired]. When Dr. Wulf-Gutierrez felt the lump, I saw her face change and I knew this could be serious," says Grecia. Her doctor ordered an immediate ultrasound and biopsy. The results came back positive for breast cancer.

**"With immediate reconstruction, the patient has to go under general anesthesia only once, and she wakes up with her breasts reconstructed. This can help many women with the psychological aspect of healing."**

—Dr. David Song

"I was 29 and had stage two triple-negative breast cancer. I was scared," says Grecia.

Grecia then met Lucy De La Cruz, MD, chief of the Breast Surgery program and director of the Ourisman Breast Center at MedStar Georgetown. "I liked her immediately. It was so inspiring to meet another Latina woman who was a highly respected surgeon. I am faith-based and believe people are put in your path at the right time. Dr. De La Cruz was exactly the guide I needed. She was warm, honest, and direct, letting me know this would not be easy, but she was there for me and explained everything. She listened and addressed my concerns," says Grecia.

"Grecia had a very aggressive form of breast cancer that tends to grow and spread fast, so we needed to get her treatment right away," explains Dr. De La Cruz. "We started her on chemotherapy for three months to shrink the 1.9 centimeter tumor."



**After her breast cancer surgery and reconstruction, Grecia Nuñez took time for self-care and visiting friends before returning to law school.**

Once the chemotherapy was completed, surgery was scheduled.

On the day of Grecia's surgery, Dr. De La Cruz performed a nipple-sparing double mastectomy. In this procedure, most of the patient's healthy breast skin, nipple, and the areola are left in place. Only the tissue contained within the envelope of skin around the breast is removed.

"Each patient's journey is unique. Grecia is a young woman with her whole life in front of her; it was important that she not be reminded of her cancer every time she saw her body. With this specialized procedure, the patient's breast looks virtually unchanged, as there is only a small scar under the crease of the breast," explains Dr. De La Cruz.

Immediately afterward, David Song, MD, plastic and reconstructive surgeon and vice president of Medical Affairs, Chief Medical Officer at MedStar Georgetown, performed reconstruction surgery using Grecia's tissue and skin, as well as implants.

"With an immediate reconstruction, our surgical and reconstruction teams work

together so that removal of the tumor and breast reconstruction are done during one operation," explains Dr. Song. "The patient has to go under general anesthesia only once, and she wakes up with her breasts reconstructed. This can help many women with the psychological aspect of healing."

After surgery, Grecia had six weeks of oral chemotherapy and intravenous immunotherapy. She finished her treatments and a follow-up exam revealed no evidence of the disease. Grecia was thrilled and ready to get on with her life.

She took time for herself, visiting friends in Hawaii and Alaska. "I needed to reset my mind and recharge my soul before heading back to law school," she says. "I feel good; my strength is returning, and I now look at every day as a blessing." Grecia is back at law school and looking forward to a career in environmental law.



### Meet Lucy De La Cruz, MD



Visit [MedStarHealth.org/DeLaCruz](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/DeLaCruz) to watch Dr. De La Cruz discuss breast cancer surgery.

For more information, please visit [MedStarHealth.org/BreastCare](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/BreastCare). To schedule an appointment, call **202-444-7055**.



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# MedStar GeorgetownMD

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## Continuing to raise the bar on world-class care.

The Verstandig Pavilion at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital is now open and serving our community. This world-class facility will enable us to continue to expand and advance clinical excellence and state-of-the-art patient care for the Washington, D.C., region and beyond.

**See page 3 to learn more.**

*MedStarGeorgetownMD*, published quarterly, shares the latest health news with our community. To start or stop receiving this newsletter, please call **202-444-6815** or email **torneyd@gunet.georgetown.edu**.

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