

Your Neighbors in Health

MedStar Montgomery Medical Center

How Self-Advocacy Made a Difference.

A Mother's Breast Cancer Story.

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A community **connected** through care.

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Your Neighbors in Health is published as a community service for friends and patrons of MedStar Montgomery Medical Center, sharing the latest health news with our community.

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Dear neighbors,

Every day at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center, we see what's possible when care is not only advanced, but truly connected—to our patients, to one another, and to the community we share. That connection is at the heart of this issue of *Your Neighbors in Health*, where each story reflects a different way that we're working to support better health, close to home.

You'll meet patients whose journeys show how coordinated care can change outcomes and restore quality of life, from orthopaedic spine care that helps patients move forward again, to cardiology and oncology stories that draw on expertise across MedStar Health. These experiences are grounded not only in clinical skill, but in collaboration: teams working together to guide patients through complex decisions with clarity and confidence. Alongside these stories, you'll find practical guidance on women's health, offering insight and support for experiences that shape everyday wellbeing.



Olney Theatre Center rehearsal of *Appropriate*.

That same spirit extends beyond our clinical spaces. Our partnership with Olney Theatre Center reflects a growing focus on behavioral health and the importance of meeting people—especially young people—in ways that feel engaging and accessible. It's one example of how we continue to look beyond traditional models of care to better serve our community.

We are also proud to recognize the individuals who make this work possible. This issue both celebrates an associate whose decades of service reflect a deep, ongoing commitment to caring for our neighbors and also welcomes a new provider who expands the expertise available within our community.

Across every story, one idea remains constant: Care is strongest when it is connected—across specialties, across settings, and across the community itself. That is the work we are proud to do every day.

Yours in good health,

Emily M. Briton, FACHE
President, MedStar Montgomery Medical Center
Senior Vice President, MedStar Health

This publication is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you have questions about your health, please consult a healthcare provider.

Getting Joey back on his feet after disc herniation.

Joey Ramelli, an operations leader from Gaithersburg, Maryland, knows firsthand how quickly disc herniation can upend daily life.

"I was at the grocery store picking up dinner when my left leg started to give out on me," Joey recalls. Though he walked into the store normally, he had to lean on a shopping cart for support on the way out.

Joey had experienced mild back issues off and on for years, but nothing like this. What started as tightness in his lower leg quickly escalated into severe pain, numbness, and weakness.

He didn't wait to seek help. After contacting his primary care physician and undergoing an MRI, Joey was quickly referred to our team at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center, where he made an appointment with **Matthew Morris, MD**, a fellowship-trained orthopaedic spine surgeon.

By the time Joey arrived for his appointment, just two days after his MRI, he could no longer walk.

"When Dr. Morris asked me to raise my right foot, I was able to do it," Joey says. "But when he asked me to lift my left foot, I just couldn't get it to move."

Dr. Morris reviewed the MRI with Joey and explained the cause: an acute disc herniation in his lower spine pressing on nearby nerves, causing severe pain and weakness in his leg.

"Many disc herniations can improve with conservative care such as anti-

inflammatory medications, activity modification, or physical therapy," Dr. Morris explains. "But with concerning symptoms like Joey had, it can be beneficial to address it surgically sooner rather than later. Waiting too long can increase the risk of permanent nerve damage."

A minimally invasive solution

Dr. Morris recommended a microdiscectomy, a minimally invasive procedure that removes a portion of a herniated disc pressing on a spinal nerve. Just days after meeting Dr. Morris, Joey underwent surgery at MedStar Montgomery, where our MedStar Orthopaedic Institute specialists provide personalized care to help patients across the full spectrum of orthopaedic conditions regain function and range of motion.

When Joey woke up after the surgery, the difference was immediate.

"The post-surgical nurse was incredible," he says. "She sat with me and reassured me everything had gone well. Then Dr. Morris came in and helped me stand up. I couldn't believe I was walking already. I was sore from the surgery, but the intense pain in my leg was gone."

Now well into his recovery, Joey is attending physical therapy at MedStar Montgomery to rebuild his strength and confidence.

"I'm living my life again and am fully back to work. I even went on a business trip not too long after my surgery and was on my feet all day," he says.

Grateful for timely care

Looking back, Joey is grateful to have



Having rebuilt his strength and confidence, Joey is happy to get back to life.

received such quick care. "I thought I had just tweaked my back," he says. "I didn't know how serious it was until I sat down with Dr. Morris, did the physical test, and reviewed the MRI."

Dr. Morris says that's a common experience shared by patients who have visited any of our 100 orthopaedic doctors across 40 locations.

"If someone is concerned or experiencing severe pain, weakness, or numbness, it's always best to have it checked out," he says. "Many people aren't sure which symptoms are concerning or time sensitive, but delaying care or toughing it out can sometimes lead to permanent nerve damage."

For Joey, timely care from a collaborative care team got him walking again.



View **Dr. Morris'** profile at [MedStarHealth.org/Morris](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Morris) or call **301-774-8958** to schedule an appointment. Visit [MedStarHealth.org/Ortho](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Ortho) for a complete list of our orthopaedic physicians and locations.

Heart set on recovery: Jennifer's path through cardiac rehabilitation.

At 82, Jennifer Fajman discovered it's never too late to start exercising. After being diagnosed with heart disease and undergoing a heart valve replacement, she turned to the Cardiac Rehabilitation program at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center for supervised recovery and guided exercise following her procedure.

"The program helped restore my energy, endurance, and enthusiasm for exercise following my valve replacement," Jennifer says. "Over the years, I had become increasingly sedentary. While I was surprised to learn I had heart disease, it was the impetus I needed to make some positive changes. The program didn't just help me recover; it gave me the tools to continue that healing on my own."

From diagnosis to minimally invasive treatment



"Jennifer was referred to me several years ago by her primary care physician because of a heart murmur," explains **Stuart Gould, MD**, her cardiologist

at MedStar Montgomery. "The ultrasound revealed aortic stenosis, a condition where the aortic valve narrows and stiffens, causing the heart to work harder to pump blood to the rest of the body. The condition worsened over time, and that is why I referred her to my colleagues at MedStar Washington Hospital Center. Jennifer was a good

candidate for a minimally invasive procedure called transcatheter aortic valve replacement or TAVR."

Instead of opening Jennifer's chest, the medical team replaced the valve by inserting a catheter through a small incision in her groin and threading the new valve up into her heart.

"I felt great after the procedure although I did notice I was more tired than usual," says Jennifer. Soon after, she began cardiac rehabilitation at MedStar Montgomery, where a structured program of exercise and nutrition helped rebuild her strength.

"The program helped restore my energy, endurance, and enthusiasm for exercise following my valve replacement."

—Jennifer Fajman

Cardiac rehabilitation enables better outcomes

"Those who attend cardiac rehab after any cardiac procedure tend to have better outcomes," notes Dr. Gould. "People become inspired when they are well supported and receive individualized attention. They see the results and that motivates them to continue with exercise long after they leave the program."

Jennifer attended cardiac rehabilitation three times a week for a total of 36 sessions. "The whole experience was wonderful," she says. "There are many people



Meeting with Dr. Gould, Jennifer has seen the benefit from her cardiac rehabilitation.

participating at the same time and the staff customizes the exercises for each person. The participants provide support to one another, which is very important to your emotional wellbeing as you recuperate."

Colleen Anastasi, cardiac rehabilitation coordinator at MedStar Montgomery, noted Jennifer's progress throughout the program. "From her intake assessment to program completion, the cardiac rehab team saw a clear increase in Jennifer's functional capacity—she was able to walk farther, with fewer symptoms, and tolerate higher levels of activity," Colleen says. "That's exactly the goal of cardiac rehabilitation: helping patients feel stronger and more confident in their daily lives."

"Now I am totally committed to regular exercise," continues Jennifer. "I walk outdoors more frequently and I joined a gym. Also, my blood pressure has improved. I am definitely headed in the right direction."



Call **301-774-8778** or visit **MedStarHealth.org/CardiacRehab** to learn more. Visit **MedStarHealth.org/Gould** to view **Dr. Gould's** full profile.

Trusting her instincts: Kamilla's breast cancer journey.

Kamilla Campbell knew instinctively that the lump she discovered two years ago was different from the many others she had found since she was diagnosed with fibrocystic breast disease at the age of 18.

"I've had multiple surgeries throughout my life to remove hard, stone-like lumps called fibroadenomas from both breasts," says the 37-year-old Damascus, Maryland, resident. "This one was very close to my armpit and I was alarmed by how fast it was growing. So I insisted on an immediate referral to a breast surgeon. I remember thinking, 'This thing needs to come out of me now!'"



"Fibrocystic breast disease is a benign condition that causes lumpy breast tissue," explains **Jennifer Son, MD**, a breast surgical oncologist who practices at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center. "It is a very common condition in young women and does not increase the risk for breast cancer. Based on Kamilla's history, it was reasonable to believe the lump

she felt was benign—another fibroadenoma. To be sure, however, I performed an excisional biopsy to remove the lump and sent the tissue to pathology."

"When Dr. Son told me I had stage 2A triple negative breast cancer, I was shocked, but not surprised," says Kamilla. "My instincts had been right, and I was so glad I had been referred to her."

Identifying a treatment plan

According to Dr. Son, this type of breast cancer is aggressive and fast growing, although Kamilla's tumor was discovered in an early stage, when the chances for a full recovery are greater.

"Triple-negative refers to three tumor markers we test during diagnosis," she explains. "Kamilla's tumor lacked receptors for estrogen and progesterone, as well as HER2—a protein that can drive cancer cell growth. Because these markers were absent, hormone therapies and HER2-targeted drugs were not effective options, so we chose chemotherapy for treatment."

"To avoid radiation, we performed a double mastectomy," adds Dr. Son. "Kamilla opted to have breast reconstruction at the same time to avoid multiple surgeries."



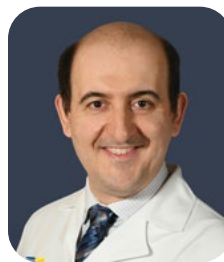
No longer taking anything for granted, Kamilla enjoys time at home with her children.

"I felt fully prepared for the chemotherapy infusions and surgeries because MedStar Montgomery provides counseling sessions that educate you about what to expect," says Kamilla. "I started the process very aware of what the next eight months of my life would be like, which helped reduce my anxiety."

A positive outcome

After recovering from surgery and 16 rounds of chemotherapy infusions, Kamilla says she now feels great

and has regained energy for hiking and other outdoor activities with her husband and three children, ages 13, 10, and 7. In addition to periodic scans and blood tests to check for circulating tumor markers, she will continue visits with Dr. Son and her medical oncologist, **Behzad Doratotaj, MD**, twice a year.



"I encourage every woman to strongly advocate for herself when faced with any healthcare crisis and to stay positive no matter the diagnosis," says Kamilla. "You know your body best, and your voice can make a huge difference in the outcome."



View **Dr. Son's** profile at [MedStarHealth.org/Son](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Son) or call **301-260-3292** to schedule an appointment. To view **Dr. Doratotaj's** profile, visit [MedStarHealth.org/Doratotaj](https://www.MedStarHealth.org/Doratotaj) or call **301-774-8697** for an appointment.

Four facts about perimenopause and menopause all women should know.



With so much information about perimenopause and menopause online, it can feel overwhelming. Obstetrician and gynecologist (Ob/Gyn) **Sujithra Jayaraj, MD**, gets the facts straight about what women can expect during this time of change.



Fact 1: Perimenopause and menopause take place over several years.

Menopause marks the natural end of a woman's menstrual cycle. In the U.S., the average age is about 51 and a half, but most women enter perimenopause—the transitional years leading up to menopause—in their 40s and early 50s. Symptoms can last anywhere from five to seven years, or even longer.



Fact 2: Hot flashes are just one of many symptoms.

Hot flashes may be the most recognized sign of perimenopause, but they are far from the only symptom. "During perimenopause, women often notice their bodies changing in different and unfamiliar ways," notes Dr. Jayaraj. Common symptoms include:

- Irregular cycles
- Hot flashes and night sweats
- Vaginal changes
- Brain fog
- Sleep problems
- Mood shifts
- Physical changes

Symptoms vary, with some women experiencing only mild changes and others finding the transition more disruptive.



Fact 3: Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is safe and effective.

HRT remains the most effective treatment for perimenopause and menopause symptoms approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA).

"When administered under the guidance of a healthcare professional, HRT is a safe way to reduce troublesome symptoms for most women," Dr. Jayaraj says.

HRT is highly personalized, with doctors weighing the risks and benefits based on a patient's health and medical history. Combined therapy with estrogen

and progesterone (two essential female hormones that regulate the reproductive system and naturally decline during perimenopause and menopause) is recommended for many women who still have a uterus. HRT can be given as a pill, skin patch, gel, or spray, for the shortest duration consistent with the patient's needs, with periodic reevaluation.



Fact 4: Pregnancy is still possible during perimenopause.

Irregular menstrual cycles do not mean a woman is no longer fertile.

"Women in perimenopause who still menstruate and ovulate, even if irregularly, have a chance of pregnancy," cautions Dr. Jayaraj.

Pregnancy becomes unlikely only after 12 consecutive months without a period—officially marking menopause.

The bottom line

Perimenopause and menopause are natural life changes, but women do not need to suffer in silence. "If you are experiencing disruptive symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider," advises Dr. Jayaraj. "There are options that can greatly improve your quality of life. You don't have to go through these changes alone."



Visit **MedStarHealth.org/Menopause** to learn more.



To learn more about **Dr. Jayaraj**, visit **MedStarHealth.org/Jayaraj** or call **301-570-7424** to schedule an appointment.



A scene from Olney Theatre Center's spring production of *Appropriate*.

Caring for young performers, onstage and off.

A theater stage isn't where most families expect to find behavioral health care. But for a new aspect of our partnership with Olney Theatre Center, that's exactly the point: bringing preventative support to young performers and their parents, where they are.

This spring, Olney Theatre Center performed *Appropriate*—a Tony Award-winning production that asks young actors, ages 9 and 14, to step into roles handling emotionally complex themes. Support was built into the program, helping families navigate the work with steadier footing.

"This partnership is about more than services," says Emily Briton, president of MedStar Montgomery Medical Center. "It's about the kind of community we're building. When we support both health and the human spirit, we strengthen a community from the inside out."

"MedStar Montgomery Medical Center is our neighbor, and we've built a deep relationship over time," echoes Debbie Ellinghaus, executive director of Olney Theatre Center. "We raised our hand and said, 'Our theater wants to support these young performers and their families in an intentional way.' MedStar Montgomery didn't

just understand the need—they came back with a thoughtful plan: Licensed therapists from the outpatient behavioral health team were embedded alongside rehearsals from day one."

Letting support take center stage

Therapists **Julie Beckmann, LCPC**, **Lisa Frank, LCSW-C**, and **Robert Roth, MFCC**, attended rehearsals on a rotating basis, so there was a consistent, familiar presence available for check-ins or support if anything surfaced. **Danubia Samuels**, manager of outpatient psychiatry at MedStar Montgomery, coordinated the collaboration and helped ensure families knew what to expect and how to access support.



Our Behavioral Health team: Julie Beckmann, LCPC, Lisa Frank, LCSW-C, Robert Roth, MFCC, and Danubia Samuels.

"Our organizations support the same community in complementary ways," Danubia says. "MedStar Montgomery through health and healing, and Olney Theatre Center through connection, creativity, and joy."

Aside from the constant support offered throughout the actors' rehearsal period, families also had access to therapy for up to 60 days after the show concluded, providing a bridge of care once the intensity of rehearsals and performances ended.

"Our therapists' presence gave the kids permission to be brave onstage while parents had reassurance a trained professional was there to help navigate any difficulty with these very mature topics," says Debbie.

Olney Theatre Center held a parent meeting to introduce the behavioral health team and explain how support would work, so performers knew who to contact and what to expect. A few of the young performers were genuinely surprised: They'd never had a support team like this. "Just knowing it was there, from the start, made the room feel safer," Lisa shares.

In a traditional setting, families seek support when something has already gone wrong. This partnership flips that model, and the win isn't only being available—it's anticipating needs. As Danubia notes, this work reflects MedStar Health's ultimate goal for its community: proactive care that equips families with the tools and support to move forward with confidence.



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MedStar Health **Service Award** recipient.



Kevin Simms

Crisis Intervention
Services Coordinator

We are proud to proud to recognize Kevin Simms as one of our Service Award Recipients. Kevin has dedicated 45 years of service to our MedStar Montgomery Medical Center community. It's through MedStar Montgomery associates like Kevin that we have been able to continue to meet the needs of Montgomery County and the surrounding communities with care, compassion, and dedication to service for more than 100 years.

In his role of Crisis Intervention Services Coordinator, Kevin ensures people in mental health or substance-related crises receive timely, safe, and compassionate care. Kevin leads a team that serves as a critical entry point into treatment, managing behavioral and addiction interventions, identifying underlying conditions, and providing guidance to the appropriate level of care. We are proud to recognize Kevin's four decades of service delivering critical care to members of our community in their most challenging moments.

**Meet
our new
provider.**



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P 301-774-8931



It's how we **treat people.**