For many people with Parkinson’s disease, the right medication can make a world of difference. But for some patients, the ever-growing list of available medications has little or no effect.

Mary Brown was one of these patients. She came to Mercy’s Neuroscience Center looking for treatment and found relief in a specialized treatment known as deep brain stimulation, or DBS.

“I praise Dr. Hamilton and Dr. Henderson every chance I get,” she says with deep feeling. “They are the reason I am alive today. Thanks to them, I have been given my life back.”

Brown was about 50 years old when she started noticing symptoms.

“First, I lost my sense of smell,” Brown said. “Every once in a while I’ll get a whiff of something, but that’s about it. Then I started to notice that my left pinky would go spastic when I was typing.”

That small tremor eventually spread to her hand, her arm and the entire left side of her body, followed by the right side. After an already heartbreaking year during which two of her favorite uncles, her father, and her boss and mentor all passed away, she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2008 by Randall Hamilton, M.D., a neurologist with Mercy Ruan Neurology. She was 52 years old.

“I truly believe my disease progressed faster than normal because of all the stress of that year,” she says.

Dr. Hamilton tried several different medications but none alleviated her rapidly worsening symptoms.

By 2014, she says, “I looked like a 100-year-old woman. I could barely speak, and I had pain and fatigue 24/7 from cramping and tremoring.”

Dr. Hamilton suggested Brown might be a candidate for DBS, a treatment that involves implanting a small device, similar to a pacemaker, which sends electrical signals to the brain to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life.

Esmiralda Henderson, M.D., joined the staff of Mercy Neurosurgery in 2013, and is the only fellowship-trained neurosurgeon in central Iowa, specializing in deep brain stimulation, who performs the complex surgery.

After two two-step procedures to insert and program the devices on each side of her brain—one brain surgery and two battery implants in 2014—Brown saw incredible improvement.

Once barely able to walk, she is now living independently and loves having her grandchildren visit. Once almost unable to speak, she can barely contain herself when asked about her doctors.

“Dr. Henderson did her residency with the man who invented DBS!” she exclaims. “She is meticulous, kind-hearted, patient and positive – an absolute delight. We are so lucky to have her here in Des Moines.”

Brown has just as much gratitude for Dr. Hamilton, who is still part of her care team. “He’s very straightforward, kind and compassionate, as well as an excellent communicator,” she says. “Over the years, we’ve developed a doctor-patient friendship and I know he really cares about me.”

Brown is eager to share her story of recovery in hopes of raising awareness of the benefits of DBS.

“I look at my diagnosis as a blessing,” she says. “We are put here on earth to help other people, period. By speaking at support groups, and telling my story of Parkinson’s disease and DBS to anyone who’s interested, I can show people there is hope. I owe it to God to pay it forward.”

For more information on DBS and Mary Brown, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LLVzQCL9Ec.

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Deep brain stimulation surgery is life-changing for grateful patient

Esmiralda Henderson, M.D. 