

By Beth Ashley | IJ senior features writer

THREE UNSUCCESSFUL BACK SURGERIES HAD DEPRIVED JON ANGER OF HIS JOB, HIS MARRIAGE, HIS INCOME, AND THE HOUSE HE HAD LIVED IN BEFORE.

The Christmas tree is up and lights are rigged outside Jon Anger's new home in Novato.

He has reason to celebrate: Three unsuccessful back surgeries had deprived him of his job, his marriage, his income, and the house he had lived in before.

Recovered now, his nine years of pain a dim memory, Anger, 42, is philosophical. "When things get really bad, you have two choices: You get up and go again or you don't."

Seventeen doctors — including leading back surgeons at Stanford and the University of California-San Francisco Medical Center — had told him nothing could be done to repair the back surgeries that had left him incapacitated with pain and with one leg largely atrophied.

Then he heard about Kenneth Light of Mill Valley, a spine surgeon at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco and medical director of San Francisco Spine Center.

"He was the doctor I'd been looking for forever," says Anger.

Although Light believes 99 percent of people who suffer back pain don't need surgery, many have it anyway: 50 percent of his practice is to repair failed surgeries.

Anger's pain began when he was passing a 160-pound pallet of paper to a fellow roofer on a job in Pinole; the pallet broke, fell and "snapped my back."

Sore at first, the back grew progressively worse until "2 1/2 months later I couldn't walk any more. I was walking up a ladder one day and I couldn't go up and I couldn't go down. I had pain, major pain."

Bed rest, traction and muscle relaxers didn't work; a myelogram showed he had ruptured a disc.

A laminectomy — removal of the inside of the disc — didn't help; after surgery, bone spurs developed in his spinal column. A second surgery removed the spurs; a couple of years later, he needed surgery again. "After the third surgery, my disc collapsed. My right leg began to get numb, and was atrophying real bad. The circumference of my thigh went down an inch and a half. I couldn't use it at all."

After that he got conflicting advice and dire predictions from a procession of doctors: "There was a 70 percent consensus that I wasn't going to walk any more."

When he saw Light, the surgeon reversed those odds. He offered an 80 percent chance of success.

"He gave me hope. I was so discouraged by then, I had to feed off his hope. He really came through."

Light fused Anger's spine, using bone from his hip. He also removed bone chips from the nerve canal.

A day after surgery Anger was all but pain-free. Two months later, he was walking. For the next year and a half, he swam every day, trying to strengthen his leg.

After several years, Anger has a new roofing business, a new wife (Donna) and a new home. He goes water-skiing and parasailing.

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He is grateful to Light: Without him, I honestly don't think I'd be walking."

He is glad, too, for the persistence that led him to Light.

He explains: "You either roll over and die, or you get up and keep going."