

# LASIK Surgery Comes to Winchester

## A Site for Poor Eyes

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*The Winchester Star*

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Diane Larrick cried tears of joy when she sat up after her LASIK corrective eye surgery.

“I can see everything! Oh God, it’s amazing!”

Diane, who lives in Winchester, had worn glasses or contact lenses for almost 30 years, since she was 16.

She was one of four area residents who underwent LASIK (Laser Assisted In-situ Keratomileusis) surgery on Monday at the Winchester Medical Center.

Dr. John Stefano, who has performed more than 600 LASIK procedures in the last three years, obtained the use of a Visx Star S2 laser at the medical center in July. Previously, the closest LASIK centers were in Fairfax and Leesburg.

Diane’s husband, Robert Larrick, also underwent LASIK surgery on Monday.

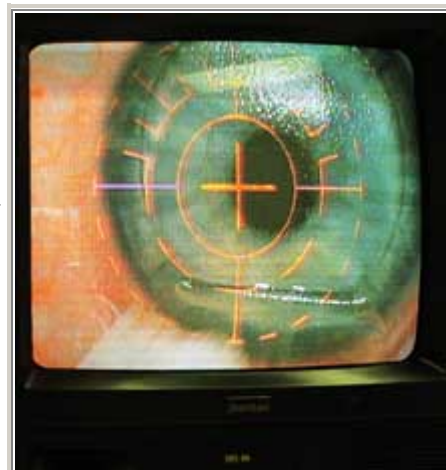
He has worn glasses or contacts for about 40 years, since he was around 12. Diane is farsighted, while Robert is nearsighted.

Everyone in Stefano’s waiting room had a lengthy list of grievances against glasses or contacts.

“When I lived in Wisconsin, I just about needed glasses with windshield wipers on them. Three-fourths of the year, it’s either raining or snowing,” said Frederick County resident Kathryn Stonebridge.

“I can’t see when I wake up. I can’t see in the shower. It’d be nice to be able to see when I swim, and it would just be nice to be able to wear sunglasses on bright days,” said Katrina Ganoe of Winchester.

Of the four area residents, who made up about half of Stefano’s patient list on Monday, Ganoe’s vision was the worst, at about 20/800.



A video monitor keeps an eye on the eye during the surgical procedure.  
(Photos by Scott Mason)

This means that what a person with normal vision could see at 800 feet, Ganoë would have to be 20 feet away to see it.

Picture an eye chart “E” the size of a barn wall.

Prescription strengths are measured in diopters, positive for farsightedness and negative for nearsightedness, with a -4 diopter roughly equivalent to 20/400 vision.

Laser vision coordinator Allison Combs calls prescriptions such as Ganoë’s a “counting fingers” level of vision. People with vision that poor can’t do much more than count fingers from a few feet away.

At the end of the 20-minute LASIK procedure, Ganoë, who started wearing glasses in the first grade, was on her way to visual freedom.

A day after her procedure, her sight had gone from 20/800 to 20/30.

You can drive a car without corrective lenses if your vision is better than 20/40.

Most people who wear glasses or contacts are good candidates for LASIK.

Patients must be at least 18 and have a prescription that hasn’t changed significantly in the past 12 months.

Women who are pregnant or people with other medical conditions may not be ideal candidates.

In their initial visit, patients go through the usual eye exam tests, plus a corneal topography to see if the cornea is too irregular for LASIK.

Stefano said less than 2 percent of potential patients have such a problem.

He also tests for the thickness of the cornea and the size of the pupil.

After that first visit, Stefano’s patients are usually able to undergo LASIK within two weeks.

From the time they walked through the door on the day of their surgery, it took slightly more than an hour before they were ready to head home.

They went through a brief pre-op exam with Stefano checking for infection and Combs going over the procedure again. Then it was into the laser suite.

Step one is lying down in the chair.

Step two is taking hold of Speckles, the stuffed leopard laser engineer Sei Boayue gives to patients as the procedure begins.

He said it helps to calm them down and gives them something to do with their hands.

“Our technicians are great,” Combs said. “Obviously you need a good surgeon, but you also need good supporting staff. They need to not only be good technicians, but also have that kind of good bedside manor that makes patients feel comfortable.”

Diane almost backed out a few days before her procedure was to be performed, and she was nervous on Monday.

But after talking with Robert just after his procedure, she was ready to go in.

“I’d do it again right now,” Robert said.

Nevertheless, Diane was still nervous, and grabbed onto Speckles immediately.

The only anesthetic used is a series of numbing eye drops.

Stefano draws a few lines on the cornea so he can realign it at the end of the surgery.

Marking the eye directly also allows him to see if the patient’s eye is completely numb.

An eyelid holder keeps the eye open throughout the rest of the procedure.

A small device called a keratome is used to take a thin flap off the cornea.

The cornea is about 600 microns thick. The keratome, which works with single-use diamond blades, applies light suction to the eye to raise it slightly and then takes off a flap about 160 microns thick.

According to most patients, it’s the most uncomfortable part of the procedure.

“There’s just a little bit of pressure but no pain,” Robert said after the procedure, as he stood and watched Diane’s surgery through the observation window.

His surgery had just been completed. “I can’t believe I’m standing here watching this. I can see everything, and I’m not wearing my glasses.”

After the flap is cut, Stefano folds it back and gets to work with the laser.

The area worked on by the laser is 25 to 50 microns thick — a typical human hair is 125 microns wide.

The laser pulses with an audible series of clicks for a few seconds to a minute.

The first burst of the laser is focused on an area 0.5 mm wide in the center of pupil.

The width of the laser burst slowly expands to 6.5 mm, slightly wider than a fully dilated pupil.

Stefano uses a small joystick to keep the laser centered in the pupil.

After the first eye, the same procedure follows with the other.

Two monitors in the room allow those looking through the observation window to see what's happening.

When the procedure is finished, patients sit up.

"Can you see what time it is?" Stefano asks.

With their vision slightly blurry for a few minutes, patients can still see the clock. It's on a wall of the laser suite, about 10 feet away.

For many, it's the first time in decades they've read a clock from that distance without glasses or contacts.

At that point, Diane started crying.

"The very first thing I saw was Dr. Stefano's nametag," she said later. "The letters were tiny, but they looked as big and clear as anything to me."

Twenty minutes earlier, before the procedure and not wearing her glasses, Diane had to feel her way through the laser suite just to find the operating chair.

With better vision than they've had in a long time, patients are then asked to perform the difficult task of keeping their eyes closed for about 15 minutes, as the flap of cornea sets firmly in place.

"I just want to open my eyes, grab a book, and read," Diane said excitedly, sitting in one of three exam rooms in Stefano's office.

When she finally opened her eyes, Combs handed her a National Geographic.

Diane flipped it open and teared up again, smiling wide. "It's just wonderful. I can read everything, even the little stuff."

For three or four hours after the surgery, patients feel a burning sensation, as if they have something in their eyes.

Most patients go home and take a nap as a result of a combination of the anesthetic eye drops and the Tylenol PM pain reliever included in the post-op package.

For the first few days after surgery, they wear a set of protective glasses while sleeping, to prevent inadvertent rubbing of their eyes.

Antibiotic and steroid drops are applied four times each day for three days. Lubrication drops are also offered, but might not be necessary.

Other than that, the only care that needs to be taken is staying away from yard work and places such as dusty barns for a week or so.

The surgery costs \$2,995 to \$3,950, based on the patient's prescription.

The stronger the prescription, the more likely it is a patient will need a brief follow-up procedure or a "tweak."

Since it's considered a cosmetic surgery, insurance doesn't pay for LASIK.

Stonebridge and her husband recently sold a house they owned in Wisconsin. "Getting this done was the first thing on the list of what we're doing with the money."

Stonebridge has wanted to have LASIK since she first heard of the procedure a few years ago.

The Larricks had thought about the procedure for a few years as well but wanted to wait until someone they knew had it done.

"Our neighbor had it done last month, and it went so well for him we came in immediately," Diane said.

Ganoë said the cost doesn't bother her. "I figure I spend \$10,000 a year in rent, so a few thousand for my eyesight is nothing."

As they leave Stefano's office after the surgery, patients have the opportunity to drop off their glasses in a "R.I.P." fishbowl.

The glasses are collected by Lions clubs and distributed to the needy in developing countries.

Patients return to Stefano's office for a follow-up a day or two after the surgery. Most are his patients, while some are referred to him from other ophthalmologists or optometrists.

Stonebridge's follow-up was performed by Dr. Iris Flores, who is also one of Stefano's former LASIK patients.

The four patients who had surgery on Monday were more than pleased with the results.

Ganoe's sight is now 20/30, while the Larricks and Stonebridge are all 20/20.

"It's a whole new world," Diane said. "My vision's a lot better than it was with my glasses or contacts. My husband's the same way. He can't believe all that he's missed. It was a lot of money, but it's the best thing we've ever done."

Stefano will hold an informational meeting for prospective patients at 6:30 p.m. on Oct. 3 in his office at WMC.

For the meeting, he will perform a LASIK procedure on closed-circuit television so visitors can watch the procedure from a conference room in his office.

For more information about LASIK, or to register to attend the informational meeting, call (540) 722-2236.