

# Tall order

## My painful, expensive quest for 3 more inches

*Akash Shukla was 18 and 4-foot-11 when he deferred enrollment to Drexel University and moved to New York to have a rare limb-lengthening surgery. To undergo the \$100,000 procedure, which is almost never performed for cosmetic reasons, Shukla had to endure nine hours of psychological testing to make sure he was a good candidate. He spent the next 3½ months in a wheelchair with six metal rings drilled into his bones. Today, at 5-foot-2, he is back at Drexel studying engineering. He tells his story to reporter Wendy Straker.*

**M**Y height really didn't bother me much until I entered high school. In middle school, I would go to the school dances and have a lot of fun, but then in high school something changed, my height became more of a factor. We had this winter ball, and I remember having such a hard time finding a date. There weren't any girls that I knew that were shorter than 4-foot-10.

During Christmas, people would compare me to an elf, saying, "You must be working hard this time of year." I would get carded for PG-13 movies. I had a full beard, and they would still ask me for ID.

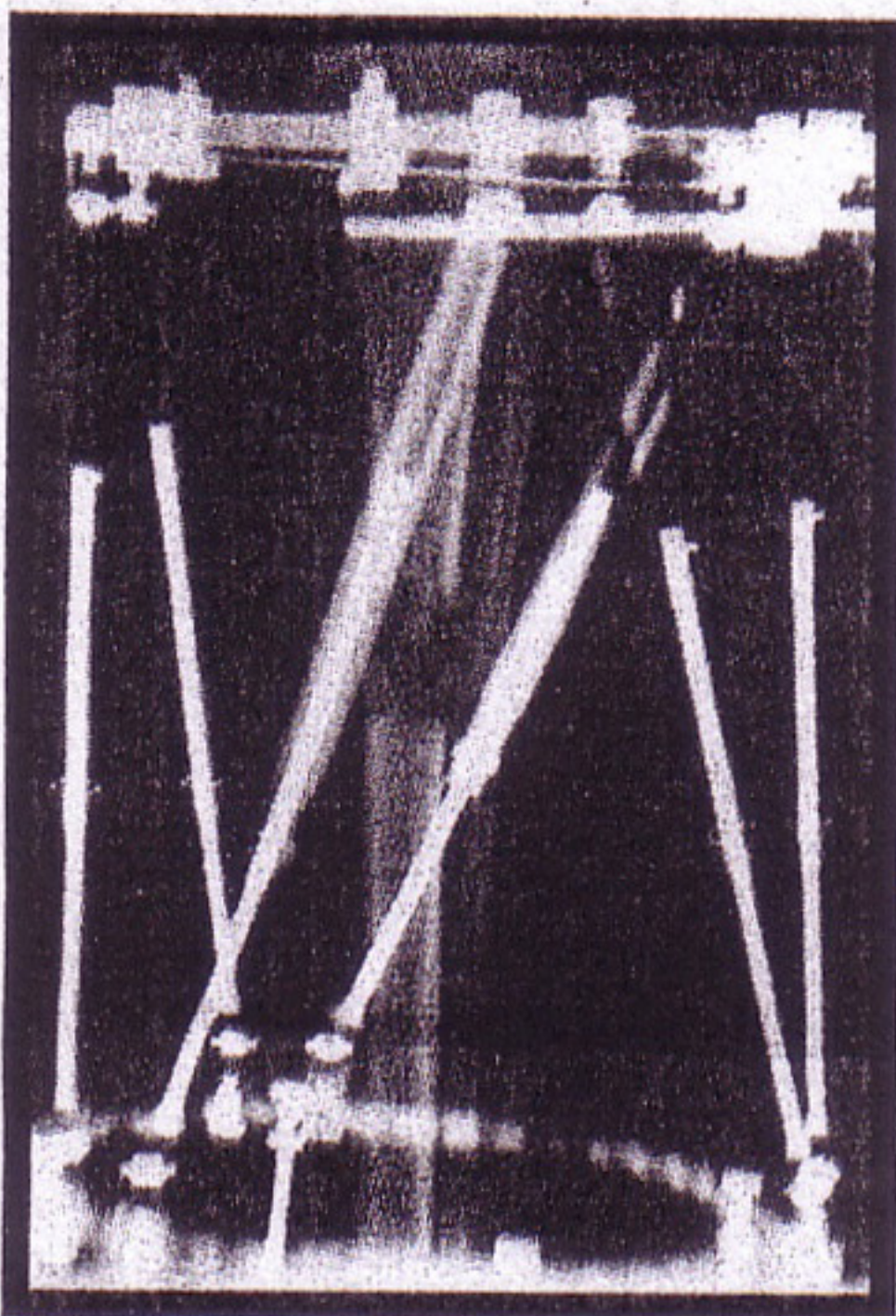
When I was 16, I went to see an endocrinologist in New York who gave me a hand X-ray. She told my parents the news first. She said that I had achieved 98 percent of my final height, but we later realized that she was probably just trying to give us a little bit of hope by leaving that extra 2 percent.

I'll never forget the day my dad (who is 5-foot-5) told me I wouldn't grow taller than 4-foot-11. I almost had to pinch myself to see if I heard him correctly. I am sure that people have it worse, but I don't know any guy who is that short. I cried and cried. I kept saying, why is God doing this to me? I am a good kid, I haven't done anything wrong. Why is God dealing me this hand?

But one thing about my dad is he doesn't take no for an answer. He was always saying things like, "There has got to be a way to increase his height somehow. There has got to be an answer." So he started doing Yahoo searches for "make yourself taller," and then one day he did a search for "short stature," and that took him to a site on limb lengthening.

He came into my room, and he said, "I think there is a way we can add 2 to 3 inches to your height." And he added, "But it's not an easy procedure, and after I tell you how it's done, you are probably not going to want to do it."

When he described how they put a rod inside your bone and cut the bone apart, I pretty much collapsed. I'd never even had minor surgery before, and this sounded so intense. At the same time, though, I felt better. I think a large part of my existing sadness stemmed not just from my height



but from not being able to do anything about it. I felt so helpless. So this surgery, even the possibility of this surgery, made me feel less helpless.

It sounds so stupid now, but the first thing I asked my dad was, "Do you think it will hurt?" And what he said was very profound. He said, "The pain will go away, but the increase in height will stay forever." That helped me a lot.

We met with Dr. S. Robert Rozbruch at the Hospital for Special Surgery's Limb Lengthening and Reconstruction Program in New York, and he was amazing. He said, "Consider me the captain of your ship. Listen to me, and I will direct you." I really can't say enough good things about him. I have never trusted someone more with my life.

The psychologist interviewed me for something like seven to nine hours. He made me do a lot of generic personality tests on the computer, he made me do the inkblot test. I don't know how important all that was, but they accepted me.

On Sept. 24, 2004, three rings were fixated on to each of my legs — one near the bottom of the knee, one in the middle of my leg between the knee and the ankle, and one directly above my ankle. The top and the middle rings were attached to the bone with metal wires, bolts and nuts. They had these six struts. Each strut had a little twisty knob at the end, which my dad would turn three times a day. When all six struts were moved by one adjustment I would gain 1 millimeter of height.

The pain of turning those knobs wasn't so bad at first, but by the end of the three months my dad literally needed a wrench to twist them. You could hear my bones separating, and I could definitely feel it.

During that time, we had this system where we would rate my pain on a scale of 1 to 10, and on most days it was a 9.5. The only relief was watching back-to-back episodes of "Friends" and "L.A. Law."

On Jan. 5, 2005, the rings were removed, which was more painful than I'd thought it would be. I had spent the last 3½ months in a wheelchair and would spend two hours a day in physical therapy learning to walk again.

But today I feel great. I just came in ninth place in my dad's 5K Corporate Challenge. This surgery has changed my life.

And it's not just my height that's changed, it's my personality. Before the surgery, I was very shy; I was very self-conscious. What bothered me most was that I knew the first thing anyone would think about when they met me was "Oh my God, this person is so short." But now I know they look at me first. Just the other night I met a girl at a party, and in order to talk to her I had to lean down to hear what she was saying. This may sound really weird, but the fact that I had to lean down was amazing.

I am 5-foot-2 now, but in my mind I am 6 feet tall.



Akash Shukla with his mother before (inset) and after the surgery that lengthened his legs by 3 inches. Far left, an X-ray of one his legs after the procedure — the dark spot in the middle is the gap where the leg was cut in half.

J. Scott Wynn

## Limb lengthening a rare wonder

**U**NDERGOING cosmetic limb lengthening is a miracle, but simple? No way. To get those 2 to 3 inches, patients submit to a surgery wherein both tibiae and fibulae — those are the bones of the lower leg — are cut. A mechanical device is then inserted in the new gap, which gradually pulls the bones apart. Very gradually.

"You can't just go in there, cut the bone and pull it apart 2 inches," says Dr. S. Robert Rozbruch, director and chief of service at the Hospital for Special Surgery's Limb Lengthening and Reconstruction Program, who performed Akash Shukla's operation. "That doesn't work — it's a very slow process of stretching, 1 millimeter per day."

The patient's own bones regenerate to fill the gap. "By gradually pulling the bones apart, we are stretching the soft tissue in the nerves, the blood vessels and the muscles, all of which create stimulus for growth," Rozbruch explains. "That's exactly how it works with a growth spurt — the bone is what grows, and all the soft tissue responds to the stretch and grows, as well."

Rozbruch emphasizes that elective limb lengthening is not for everyone. "Most surgeries we do are for reconstruction — equalization of leg length, correction of deformities. We are not running a cosmetic chop shop here."

Patients who wish to undergo limb lengthening must first submit to an intensive psychological evaluation, to determine whether they in fact suffer from "short stature dysphoria" — meaning they are consistently unhappy with their height, while being well-adjusted and happy in other aspects of their lives.

"The patients who do this are not people who are like, 'Oh, wow, it would be really cool to be 3 inches taller,'" Rozbruch says. "They are in severe psychological distress over their short stature. This is a complex procedure — it's just not as simple as doing a nose job."

Not as cheap, either. The psych consult alone costs \$440, while surgery and lengthening run from \$80,000 to \$100,000 — and must be paid upfront.

Still, for some — like Akash Shukla — it's all worth it. [rock@nypost.com](mailto:rock@nypost.com)



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