



No Time to Be Down

Outstanding spinal surgery maintains patient's active life

BY CANDACE PEARSON

BY HER OWN DESCRIPTION, Samantha Pyle Buono is “not an athlete who’s running marathons, training for an Ironman or playing tennis or golf.” But she maintains a demanding schedule as a working mother of two teenage boys that could tire out any competitor.

“I’m the kind of mom who never misses a water polo game, makes all the snacks, rides the team bus to away games, sits in the bleachers and stands in line for two days at Disneyland,” she says. “Our family loves doing things together. I don’t have time to be down.”

When severe back pain kept her from doing the things she loves with the people she loves, the Palm Desert resident sought expert surgical help — three times — at Eisenhower Neuroscience Institute.

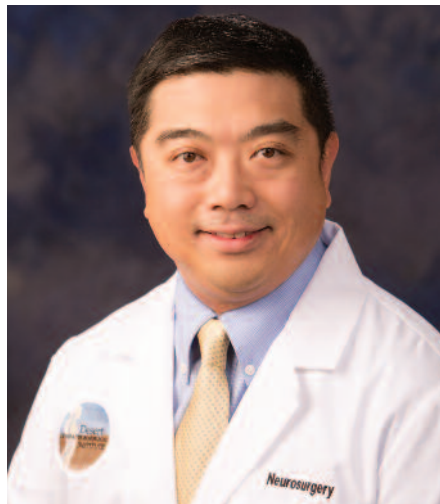
Two babies and back pain

Buono, now 52, was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) at 29. In her early 30s, she stopped all her RA medications to have children. Following the birth of her second child in 2005, her back pain began in earnest.

Initially, she tried conservative measures such as massage and chiropractic visits. Then, she stepped over a baby gate, and with that one move, could barely walk. A visit to an emergency room diagnosed a herniated disc.

Buono started researching highly-rated neurosurgeons, initially assuming, “I would need to go to Los Angeles or San Diego,” she says.

She called her contacts among the team of surgeons and physicians she knew from her job with the nonprofit Concussion



“We place a priority on determining the specific issues behind each patient’s pain, then basing treatment on the specific cause.”

— ALFRED SHEN, MD

Legacy Foundation, which supports athletes, veterans and others affected by concussions and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease. Buono’s father, Mike Pyle, had been a talented offensive lineman for the Chicago Bears NFL team and successful broadcaster before succumbing to CTE.

The consensus was: go to Eisenhower Health. “I found out I would be in the best hands right here in the desert,” says Buono.

In 2006, she underwent a discectomy, which removed the damaged portion of a disk pressing on her spinal cord. She felt “okay, but not awesome” for two years. One day, she bent down to pick up a pool raft and twisted to throw it. She fell to the ground and could not get up.

Spinal fusion specialists

Buono’s first spinal fusion took place in 2008. Assisting was Alfred C. Shen, MD, Board Certified Neurosurgeon at Eisenhower Neuroscience Institute, who specializes in complex and minimally invasive spine surgery. After removing two degenerated discs, the surgeons fused the two lowest vertebrae of her lumbar spine (L4-L5) and the lumbosacral joint (L5-S1).

Dr. Shen cautioned Buono that the adjacent discs might be at risk from the changed mobility in her back. But she enjoyed more than a decade of “camping, hiking, anything I wanted to do.” At the 10-year-mark, she began to feel some twinges.

“Ten years is a good performance for a successful lumbar fusion,” says Dr. Shen. “Because Samantha is so active, she experienced what many patients do — ‘adjacent segment degeneration.’ Basically, the altered biomechanics in her back resulted in accelerated degeneration above the fused segment.”

The Eisenhower Neuroscience Institute offers expertise in surgical and non-surgical treatment of a full range of spine and brain disorders. And within the hospital, there is a specialized unit designated for postoperative spine patients, with highly skilled nurses and therapists who help to mobilize these

PHOTOS: ETHAN KAMINSKY