

patients. “We place a priority on determining the specific issue(s) behind each patient’s pain,” says Dr. Shen, “then basing treatment on the specific cause.”

Early in 2020, Buono decided it was time for her second fusion surgery — right when COVID-19 shut down many surgeries. By July, Dr. Shen called Buono; COVID numbers were down, and a window had opened. Buono, whose 50th birthday was coming up, asked if she could wait until after that. He said, “Yes.”

Two more days of pain convinced Buono otherwise. She called Dr. Shen, saying, “Forget about the birthday. I’m ready.”

Dr. Shen took the lead for Buono’s second spinal fusion, focusing on vertebrae L3- L4, “which were now misaligned and loose from stress,” he says. He utilized a posterior interbody fusion, a procedure performed through the back, which allowed him to better navigate around the previous surgeries and decompress the nerves at this level.

Buono calls her latest fusion “the easiest, with the best recovery.” Helping her to get there was Dr. Shen and his staff. “I felt like I had an entire team rooting for me.”

Institute physicians collaborate as needed with an interdisciplinary group of specialists at Eisenhower Health, including interventional radiologists, critical care specialists, pain specialists, medical and radiation oncologists, endocrinologists and primary care physicians. In Buono’s case, because of her underlying rheumatoid

arthritis, Dr. Shen worked closely with her rheumatologist to modify her arthritis medications after surgery, as these can sometimes interfere with the healing process.

Now, nearly three years later, Buono is delighted to balance family time with husband, Giorgio, and their sons Nico, 17, and Luca, 19, with her work advocating for CTE awareness. “I got my life back,” she says, “I’m so grateful.”

“My encounters with Samantha have always been a very positive experience,” remarks Dr. Shen. “She is motivated and committed to being an active participant not only with her family and endeavors, but with her own health and healing. I am happy to have participated in her successful back surgery and wish her a long and healthy future.”

“I found out I would  
be in the best hands  
right here in  
the desert.”

— SAMANTHA PYLE BUONO



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