

By LAUREN STEUSSY

ALL her life, Christina Giuffrida dealt with annoying medical problems, from headaches and hearing problems to ear infections. But they never seemed that serious.

“Kids get ear infections all the time,” the 19-year-old Yonkers resident reasoned when she had two such infections this year within months of each other. And her near-constant migraines? Her doctors chalked it up to bad vision.

Giuffrida’s hearing also wasn’t great — she’d often ask teachers and friends to repeat themselves — but she could eventually make out what they’d said.

And while seasonal allergies often gave her a sore throat, one early April morning, the problem seemed much worse.

“I woke up three times during the night,” she says. “I couldn’t swallow because the pain was so bad.” At 6 a.m., she told her mom she needed to go to the emergency room.

In the hospital, doctors did a CT scan of her head and found a cyst. Days later, an MRI revealed that the cyst was a benign, 1.37-inch tumor, which had, unknown to Giuffrida or any of her doctors, actually been present since birth. The symptoms of tumors like hers, including the earaches and headaches, don’t show up until later in life, her surgeon, Dr. Constantinos Hadjipanayis, tells *The Post*.

“She was headed toward really serious symptoms — having problems with swallowing or speaking — that would have happened within a month,” says Hadjipanayis, the director of neurosurgical oncology at Mount Sinai.

“It’s remarkable how big the tumor was when she presented with this thing that she was living with,” he says.

Her doctors believe the swelling in her throat, caused by allergies, was pressing against the tumor and causing her pain. But it was that pain, scary as it was, that compelled her to get screened, which revealed exactly what she was dealing with before it got worse.

Two weeks after her visit to the ER, she entered surgery to remove the tumor. Her mom and her boyfriend were terrified, and more than a dozen family members gathered in the waiting room for the six-hour procedure.

“I’m usually the nervous one, but when it came to this, I was calm about it because I was just grateful that it wasn’t cancerous,” Giuffrida says.

Still, the surgery was risky. The tumor was tangled up in delicate nerves. One

Christina Giuffrida is back in action after emergency surgery to remove a brain tumor (inset).



Stefano Giovannini



MY SORE THROAT WAS A BRAIN TUMOR

Years of supposedly routine health issues nearly turned deadly for this 19-year-old — here’s how she’s healing after a nightmare diagnosis

wrong move could trigger a stroke or permanent damage, such as facial paralysis. To help remove it, Hadjipanayis used a new form of robotically controlled digital microscope, a Modus V, made by Toronto-based company Synaptive. The Food and Drug Administration-cleared device has been in use at Mount Sinai for about two years. It’s designed to help neurosurgeons operate with a crystal-clear visualization of their patient’s brain. And, in patients like Giuffrida, doctors can be sure they’re not missing any part of the tumor when they cut it out.

“We had used a standard microscope to do it before, but with the robotic-assisted technology, we’re able to magnify the view and see it in high definition to really feel the structure around the tumor, without hurting the patient,” Hadjipanayis says.

Giuffrida noticed a shift in her senses the moment she woke up from surgery. Where before she’d struggle to have a conversation with someone an arm’s length away because of her faulty hearing, after the successful procedure, the opposite was true.

“I came out of surgery and [when] my dad started talking to me, it sounded like he was screaming,” she says. “He was barely even talking at more than a whisper, though.”

Slowly, as her brain’s nerves stabilized, her hearing became normal — “better than ever,” she says. But she has had a long recovery, relearning such basic functions as balance and swallowing as her brain began to “rewire” itself after the nerves were shifted during surgery, Hadjipanayis says. For weeks, she couldn’t read her textbooks because her vision was so blurry, or walk more than a few feet without getting unsteady or exhausted.

“It was so frustrating because I knew I could walk, I knew I could talk,” she says. “I could do all the normal things, but my brain was just rewiring itself, so it wouldn’t let me.”

Now, less than two months after the surgery and rehab, Giuffrida is back in school, studying criminal justice at Westchester Community College and working in retail to pay her way. She considers the crescent-shaped scar running from her temple to below her ear as a badge of honor.

“My scar shows that I’m strong, so I’m not self-conscious about it,” she says. “I feel proud. A lot of people don’t have that second chance.”

A heartwarming reason to take a trip

This good news should travel fast.

People who take more vacations have a lower risk of heart disease, according to a new study.

Researchers at Syracuse University interviewed more than 60 subjects about their vacation habits in the prior year. They also evaluated whether the subjects had meta-

bolic syndrome, that is, whether they displayed multiple symptoms associated with cardiovascular problems, including high measurements of waist circumference, blood pressure, triglyceride level, HDL cholesterol level and glucose level.

“What we found is that people who vacation more frequently in the

past 12 months have a lowered risk for metabolic syndrome and metabolic symptoms,” says lead author Bryce Hruska, an assistant professor of public health at Syracuse’s Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics.

“Metabolic syndrome is a collection of risk factors for cardiovascular disease. If you have more of them,

you are at higher risk of cardiovascular disease,” Hruska says. “This is important because we are actually seeing a reduction in the risk for cardiovascular disease the more vacationing a person does. Because metabolic symptoms are modifiable, it means they can change or be eliminated.”

The study, published this week in the *Journal of Psychology & Health*, fur-



Luis Rendón/
NY Post

ther discovered the odds of having metabolic syndrome decreased by 24 percent with each additional vacation taken. The number of vacations taken by participants in the last year ranged from 0 to 15.

“So if someone is doing more vacationing, they can actually decrease their risk for cardiovascular disease,” Hruska says.

— Hana Alberts