

People

Woman Says ‘Plastic Surgery Saved My Life’ After Doctor Sees Something ‘Suspicious’ (Exclusive)

Cara Lynn Shultz | March 19, 2025



Dr. Kimberly Lee with patient Janine Avanti. Photo: Kimberly Lee, MD

- Janine Avanti, an actress and bodybuilder, met with a plastic surgeon for a facelift — and asked her to remove what she thought was a benign fibroid
- **Dr. Kimberly Lee**, who had been a head and neck surgeon before focusing on cosmetic surgery, looked at the tumor and thought it looked “suspicious”
- After Dr. Lee removed the tumor and it turned out to be a rare variant of cancer, she stayed involved in Avanti’s case, advocating for her care

Janine Avanti had always struggled with fibroid tumors.

The actress and bodybuilder from Lake Forest, Calif., was familiar with the growths — she’d had them before on her breast and under her scalp. But when one particularly unsightly growth appeared on her neck, she sought medical attention.

“When I went to the doctor to have this one looked at they’re like, ‘Oh you have a history of fibroids. If it’s really not bothering you, let’s just leave it alone.’ And of course, I wanted to believe that,” Avanti, 51, tells PEOPLE.



Janine Avanti competes in a bodybuilding competition in December 2023.
PHOTO: Lu Lyall

At the time, Avanti was filming the thriller *When Death Comes Knocking* and didn’t want to remove the lump because of the scar it would leave. But soon, she could no longer ignore it, she says. “It was like the end of a thumb sticking out of my neck. I could hide it with my hair. Other people didn’t notice it, but obviously, I felt it. I knew it was there.”

She continues: “It got to the point where it was starting to bother me, along with, obviously, turning 50. My looks, being in movies, being on stage as an amateur bodybuilder... I thought, ‘You know what? It’s time for me to have a lower facelift.’ ”

That’s when she found [Dr. Kimberly Lee](#), who had previously specialized in head and neck surgeries before shifting her focus to cosmetic surgery.

“She had all these awards in her office on the walls for being a cancer head and neck surgeon,” Avanti recalls. “And I was like, wow, that’s impressive. Maybe I should ask her about this tumor.

Maybe she can remove this fibroid while we're doing this lower facelift jawline and neck lift surgery."



Janine Avanti before surgery. PHOTO: Kimberly Lee, MD

Dr. Lee asked if she'd had the lump looked at and Avanti said it was "no big deal," explaining that it was just another fibrous tumor. Dr. Lee agreed to remove it and take a closer look. Surgery was scheduled for March 2024.

The entire surgery was supposed to take three hours, but removing the "fibroid" alone took three and a half hours, Dr. Lee tells PEOPLE.

"When I saw the tumor, I didn't like the way it looked, because it was matted, really stuck to everything around it," she says. "When we have a benign tumor or a benign mass, these things come out relatively easily. Everything comes out in one piece. This particular mass was not like that. So I already knew that this was not good."

As Avanti says, "This was like a chewed-up piece of dark bubble gum. It was attached to everything." Avanti had also gradually developed a crooked smile — the result, Dr. Lee tells PEOPLE, of the tumor invading the nerves in her neck.



Janine Avanti had developed a crooked smile from the tumor. PHOTO: Janine Avanti

“I knew that this was already suspicious for something malignant,” Dr. Lee says. She sent it to the lab for testing.

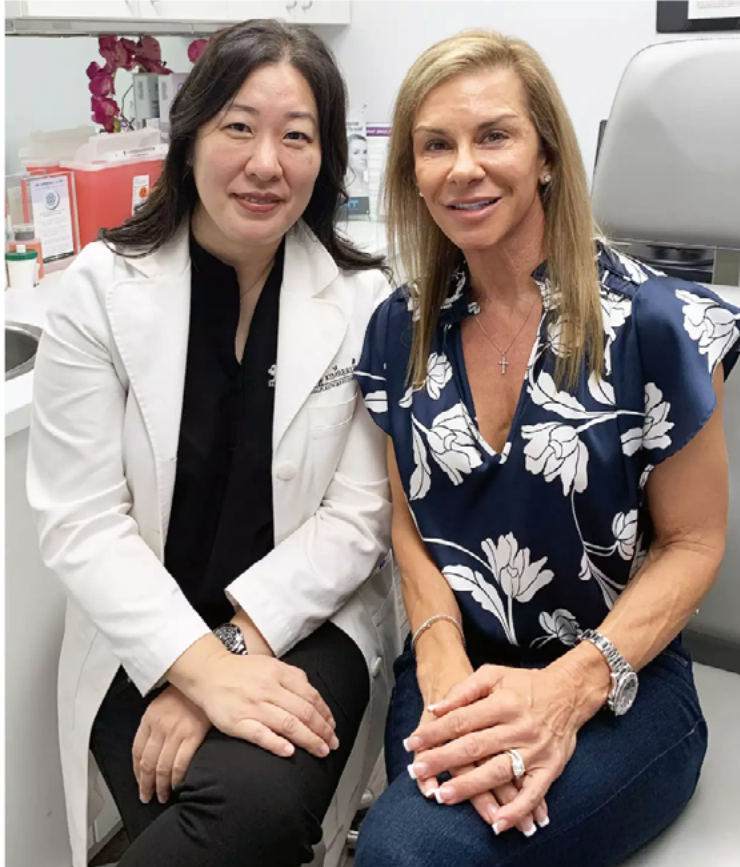
“I was calling pathology on a daily basis, and kept being told, ‘Ooh, we need to do more studies on this.’ So I knew it was a little bit unusual already, but then I did receive a call back saying that this was a very rare variant of a type of tumor.”

The tumor was so invasive that Avanti says her face was “paralyzed” while she recovered from its removal, but she says Dr. Lee reassured her. “She told me it was normal considering how deep we had to go [to get it out], but my movement would return.”

Dr. Lee says that for Avanti’s rare variant of her rare tumor, surgery is generally the first line of treatment — but because she had been so thorough in removing the tumor, Avanti didn’t need any further surgery. However, she says, “There was a little bit of spread into the nerve, [so] she needed some radiation treatment.”

Dr. Lee referred Avanti to an oncologist but stayed involved in her care. As Avanti says, Dr. Lee “advocated for me every single day.” She explains, “It was a lot of emails and a lot of phone calls to get me in to see the proper oncologist that I needed to see.”

That’s because Dr. Lee believes in a deeper connection with her patients, she tells PEOPLE. “The relationship between surgeon and the patient doesn’t end when the surgery is over or after a couple of follow-up appointments,” Dr. Lee explains. “It’s really a bond that extends throughout the entire healing process and beyond.”



Dr. Kimberly Lee and Janine Avanti. PHOTO: Kimberly Lee, MD

With Avanti, she says, “I needed to get her to the best care with the head and neck oncologist, and because I am a head and neck surgeon, I know those people. So it was a lot of behind-the-scenes phone calls trying to get her in to see somebody as soon as possible.”

She continued: “I didn’t want her to get lost or fall through the cracks. I wanted to make sure she was going to get all the care she needed and be okay.”

After all, she says, feeling secure about treatment can lead to better prognostic outcomes. “When patients know that they have somebody rooting for them in their corner, they just feel more confident and empowered to take on what comes next.”

Now Avanti is in the process of recovering, telling PEOPLE, “I do try to remind myself that I was healthy before cancer, before I was told that I had cancer, and I know that I can be healthy after.”

And she credits her surgeon for it all. “Dr. Lee cared so much about me. She made sure that I was doing well through my treatment, that I recovered well. She just truly made sure that everything that I was going through, that I was okay, physically and mentally.”

“I just feel like plastic surgery saved my life,” she tells PEOPLE. “Dr. Lee saved my life.”

<https://people.com/plastic-surgery-saved-my-life-suspicious-exclusive-11698710>