In the summer of 2014, during her last months of pregnancy, Kaitlin Eppinger began experiencing severe headaches and migraines. Her OB/GYN prescribed medication and they gradually went away, but returned after the birth of her daughter. When the headaches persisted, she had blood work done that revealed she had Lyme disease. She received treatment and started to feel better but was still not 100%. Usually a very active person, she noticed lack of energy along with some new symptoms, body tingling and blurred vision. She thought they might be related to the Lyme disease, but her doctor suggested an MRI to rule out further issues.

Kaitlin had started teaching a new school year in her kindergarten classroom, and was feeling overwhelmed and stressed, when normally a new year brought excitement. The day after the MRI, she received a phone call at school with her results; she was instructed to call her husband to drive her to the Emergency Department immediately, as a mass the size of an orange had been found in her brain.

Doctors explained that the mass was of an irregular shape and size, very large, and located near her frontal lobe. Based on the presentation, they were surprised to see that she was up, walking and talking. She was immediately referred to Dr. Jennifer Moliterno Gunel, a neurosurgeon who specializes in the surgical treatment of brain tumors at Smilow Cancer Hospital.

“Upon meeting Dr. Moliterno I could tell she was a very caring person,” said Kaitlin. “I was in shock, so my husband asked most of the questions, but she took the time to listen and make sure we understood everything. We both felt very comfortable with her. She put it simply for us, ‘this is something that is not supposed to be there, and we are going to get it out.’ From that point on I trusted her completely.”

While reviewing Kaitlin’s MRI, Dr. Moliterno noticed a very small and subtle finding that had been overlooked at the outside hospital. “I was concerned that there was a large, possibly abnormal blood vessel supplying the deep portion of the tumor,” said Dr. Moliterno, “so I ordered a special test called a CT angiogram (CTA) that shoots dye into the blood vessels to be performed before her surgery.” The CTA revealed the tumor to not only have a robust blood supply, but an aneurysm of one of the main arteries feeding the tumor. According to Dr. Moliterno, aneurysms of blood vessels supplying tumors are exceptionally uncommon and can be acutely life threatening if not found.

Dr. Moliterno immediately called upon her colleagues, Drs. Murat Gunel and Charles Matouk for their input and expertise. Smilow is the only hospital in Connecticut with an operating room with the capability to perform an intra-operative angiogram right in the operating suite where tumors are commonly removed. Dr. Matouk was able to successfully glue the blood vessel with the aneurysm shut and in the span of minutes, Dr. Moliterno began surgery. Had Kaitlin not been at Smilow and there had been a delay in between the two procedures, the outcome could have been very different.

Heading into surgery, Kaitlin brought with her a book of photos of her daughter. She wanted to be able to see her first thing when she woke up. Kaitlin’s surgery, with the treatment of the aneurysm, took over 10 hours. “Dr. Moliterno saw me as a person, not a cancer patient,” said Kaitlin. “I knew that she would get me better so that I could continue being a mother to my daughter.” Over 98% of the tumor was successfully removed, and Kaitlin received radiation treatments to kill the remaining portion.

Kaitlin still has a long road ahead and will be monitored closely for any signs of a recurrence. Combining surgical expertise with state-of-the-art technology saved her life. She is now hiking, doing Yoga, running, and enjoying all the things she used to. “Sometimes I have to remind myself that I had a brain tumor, and maybe I should slow down,” said Kaitlin. “But I don’t want to waste any time. The silver lining in all of this is I get to spend time with my daughter. I am taking the time to get healthy and knowing Dr. Moliterno is there for me if I need her is a great comfort.”