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The Star-Ledger

EDITION

SNOWFALL: Mostly cloudy and cold with snow arriving tonight.

 at 7 A.M.
20°

 at 2 P.M.
30°

 at 7 P.M.
30°

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2003

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THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

READY TO FACE HIS FUTURE



TYSON TRISH FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Parsippany plastic surgeon, examines Gianleonardo Ciccone of Milan, Italy, a month after performing surgery to alter features that had deteriorated from a rare medical condition. Above left, Ciccone as he looked before the surgery.

Surgeon restores man's appearance

BY ROB WILLIAMS
 STAR-LEDGER STAFF

For nearly a decade, Gianleonardo Ciccone was in a world of confusion.

Each morning for five years, the unmarried Italian man looked in the bathroom mirror at his Milan home and watched his face mysteriously morph from its youthful, vibrant appearance into a sunken, saddened expression that oddly mirrored the inner pain and frustration he felt about his deteriorating facial features.

"Every morning when I woke up, I saw my problem," said Ciccone, a 30-year-old buyer for a food distribution company in Italy. "It was difficult."

Adding to his misery was the fact that for another five years, he could not find a solution to his problem, until a family friend, Frank Femino of Kearny, reached out to doctors at Clara Maass Medical Center in Belleville.

"He went to see a lot of doctors (in Italy), but they didn't tell him anything," said Femino, who helped translate for Ciccone during his visit to Belleville,

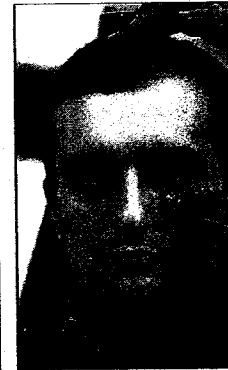
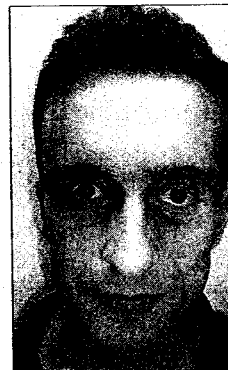
where he underwent reconstructive surgery. "His doctors told him he was 'normal.'"

Ciccone recently underwent the surgery at the hospital to restore physical features degenerated as a result of an illness known as hemifacial microsomia, a syndrome that caused the fat and tissue on one side of his face to deteriorate, leaving a distorted and uneven appearance.

The syndrome typically begins at infancy, when the underdevelopment of facial tissue and fat, as well as bone structure, occurs sporadically. It is usually diagnosed at birth, in one out of 3,500 infants, and is corrected through surgeries on the affected features beginning around age 5. Some doctors believe it might be inherited.

"In kids, it involves the bone and soft tissue," said Sam Rizk, a Parsippany plastic surgeon who performed the surgery. "In his case, it only involved facial tissue."

Ciccone's case was unique, according to Rizk, since he has no family members with the disease and his symptoms did not appear until he was an adult. The deterioration stopped suddenly when he was 25.



Left, a photo of Ciccone before the procedure and, at right, after.

"It's unusual for a 20-year-old," said Rizk, a nationally recognized expert in his field. "It could be the result of a viral illness, but there has been no case of a viral or blood born disease (causing hemifacial microsomia)."

Last year, Ciccone reached out to Femino, whose son — also named Frank — practices at Clara Maass as an orthopedist

and joint specialist.

The younger Femino described Ciccone's condition to Rizk, who practices facial plastic surgery at the hospital and in Manhattan, and works as a professor at Manhattan's Eye and Ear and Lenox Hill hospitals.

After reviewing Ciccone's case, Rizk decided to donate his services, which would cost more

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than \$20,000 for this procedure.

"It was a very unusual case. It was a challenge," said Rizk. "I could see why a good-looking guy like him would be upset when half his face had degenerated. I knew I could make him better."

Ciccone began consulting with Rizk last summer and came to New Jersey last month to prepare for the Jan. 18 surgery. Staying in Kearny with relatives of the Feminos, Ciccone underwent an eight-hour operation, in which Rizk attached Alloderm, a graft material made from donated skin, to his fa-

cial muscles to fill holes around his left cheek, ear and eye where fat and tissue once existed.

Ciccone left the hospital the same day and stayed in Kearny for four weeks while he recuperated. Although Ciccone has a long time before he fully recovers, he said during an interview at his last post-operative examination that he has already noticed a change.

"It's different," said Ciccone, who will travel to United States for follow-up examinations once a year for the next five years. "It's better now."

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