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Her heart beats the odds

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By **BETTY ADAMS**
Staff Writer

KENNEBEC JOURNAL *Morning Sentinel*

Thursday, February 08, 2007



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Staff photo by Joe Phelan

Andy McLean plays with his daughter Haley McLean on Tuesday in Chelsea. Haley was born with a heart defect in December 2005. After surviving two open-heart surgeries, and facing the prospect of many more, she is regarded by her parents as their little miracle.

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from the Morning Sentinel

CHELSEA -- Fourteen-month-old Haley smiled at her father, Andy McLean.

"Da, da, da, da," she said, reaching for him.

She walks while holding a strong adult hand, and she hones her seven front teeth by nibbling on a baby biscuit.

Haley, like 35,000 to 40,000 other babies a year in the United States, was born with a defective heart.

In Maine, the tiny girl could easily be the face of Congenital Heart Defect Week, a week timed each year to coincide with Valentine's Day. This year, that week runs from Feb. 7-14.

After surviving two open-heart surgeries, and facing the prospect of many more, she is regarded by her parents as their little miracle.

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"We have a strong Christian faith," said her mom, Susan McLean.

The petite, tow-headed, hazel-eyed girl born Dec. 7, 2005, is small but shows no sign of disability while playing in the living room and kitchen of her house. Early one afternoon, she sat in a wheeled walker, rapt by the classical music of an animated "Little Einstein" cartoon.

"She's taken a few steps on her own," Susan McLean said.

Her pediatrician, Dr. Kieran Kammerer, heard a murmur in Haley's heart when she was two days old and sent her for an echocardiogram that disclosed the problem: her heart was failing to pump enough to circulate the blood through her body.

"We credit him with saving her life," Susan McLean said.

"Many, many parents bring their children home from the hospital and they die days later," Andy McLean said. "We were lucky."

The McLeans offer their story to alert other parents about congenital heart defects and maybe save a few at-risk children.

Since that initial diagnosis of a too-narrow aorta arch and a ventricle defect, many people have listened to Haley's heart.

"She's got a really neat sounding murmur from what we've been told," her mom said.

Haley had her first open-heart surgery when she was five days old. Surgeons in Boston worked to open and widen her aortic arch and close a hole between the ventricles. There were other problems, Susan McLean said, but these were immediately life-threatening.

Faced with the prospect of losing Haley, the parents wanted their family together.

The pastor of the Kennebec Community Church in Augusta, Chris Johnson, drove then 5-year-old Andy McLean II to Boston. The McLean family spent 14 days at a hotel because the Boston Ronald McDonald House there is reserved for cancer patients.

The surgery went well, but infection set in.

Remaining in Boston to be with Haley, the McLeans took hope from their fellow congregants. "At times during the service, they called us and called out, 'We love you,'" Susan McLean said.

Haley came home with a catheter in her chest. "We infused her meds at home for six weeks," Susan McLean said.

But the infection had destroyed Haley's aortic valve.

Another risky open-heart surgery was scheduled, this time at Maine Medical Center in Portland. Surgeons replaced Haley's valve with a donor valve, but her heart refused to restart. Depending on what doctors found at the second surgery, they were prepared to create a three-chambered heart, Andy McLean said.

They didn't have to.

After 16 days in intensive care, Haley's heart began beating on its own, and a pace-maker implant was canceled.

The donor valve doesn't grow with Haley, so she will need to have that replaced every few years as she gets bigger and stronger.

"She'll let us know when she's ready," Susan McLean said.

Now seeing their healthy, pink-cheeked, toddler, the McLeans say they realized Haley had shown early signs of poor circulation.

"In early pictures, her feet are bright purple," Andy McLean said. Her parents thought it was the result of ink used to take her footprint. In fact, one nurse told them that 30 years ago, infants like Haley were known as "blue babies," and there was little that could be done for them.

Advancements in medicine mean heart defects like Haley's can be treated.

"At this point, her cardiologist fully expects to be passing her on to an adult cardiologist," Andy McLean said.

The family and others in the field are hoping more screening for heart defects like Haley's can save more children and enable them to lead happy, healthy lives.

The McLeans also take heart and hope from "Precious Hearts," an Internet community they learned about through the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit in Portland. The group offers quarterly education meetings for parents of babies with congenital heart defects.

There's also a Congenital Heart Information Network, on-line at <http://tchin.org/>, a national group giving information, support, financial help and resources "to families of children with congenital heart defects and acquired heart disease, adults with congenital defects, and the professionals who work with them," according to their Web site.

At one point, the McLeans both worked for Progressive Distributors, the distribution center for Hannaford Bros. supermarkets. But now Susan stays home with Haley, and Andy works four 10-hour shifts a week as night-time operations supervisor.

"I can't even believe what we've been through with her as an infant," said Susan McLean. "Other times we think what a blessing she is for our lives. We look at things differently now."

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Reader comments

LM of Augusta, ME

Feb 8, 2007 8:51 AM

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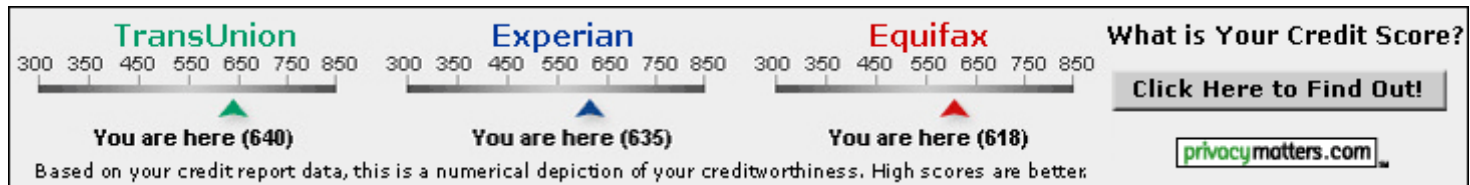
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