

Dad's Great Big Miracle Day!

Benjamin, the preemie, chose life!

6-pound newborn miraculously beats rare fetal disorder after 17 days

By Glenn Matlock

Even his doctors say it's a miracle little Benjamin, the preemie, is alive today. There were plenty of reasons for him not to make it.

Six pounds at birth and taken suddenly by caesarian section 42 days premature, he came into this world burdened with an extremely rare disorder – fetal maternal transfusion. The condition causes the fetus to give blood to the mother in the womb, but it gets none in return.

A normal hematocrit reading for a newborn, the infant's percentage of red blood cells, is between 35 and 60 percent. Anything under 15 percent can cause cardiac failure. Benjamin's reading after the caesarian was 10 percent, said Steve Hill, the father.

"The nurses gave Benjamin an O Negative blood transfusion. Without a transfusion they couldn't tell what his blood type was. His red cell count was undetectable because they couldn't find any blood," Steve said.

Benjamin's doctors and his nurses couldn't see a chance under heaven that the preemie would survive. The resident neonatologist at Eastside Medical Center, who was called in to save the child, had not seen a similar condition in 10 years. The delivery doctor told the family in 15 years of medical practice he'd never seen a newborn look so bad and still be alive. He called the lily-white child, a "still-born with a heartbeat," Steve said.

Everything had been going well with Martha's first eight months of pregnancy. She already had given birth to two healthy children, so there was little reason for concern. However, on April 9, with a little more than a month remaining until May 22, her due date, something went wrong. The pending crisis might have gone undetected deep inside the womb, but as if prompted, the expectant father expressed timely concern.

"It all started on that Saturday, when we were doing yard work," Steve said. "I nonchalantly looked over at Martha and asked, 'have you felt the baby move today?' She said, 'No, but he naps and sleeps and stuff. It's not uncommon.'"

Steve insisted that the baby be monitored for the remainder of the day. There were no strong impressions, his sudden concern simply came from out of the blue, he said.

Of course, it wasn't unusual for Steve to express concern about his unborn son. Steve's known to be a "borderline hypochondriac" – always checking the children's well being, Martha said. Despite the agonizing days that lay ahead, the family now sees that moment as Benjamin's "first miracle."

When the Hills failed to get the child to



Above left, Steve and Martha Hill family enjoy a little togetherness with son Jonathan and daughter Abigail after bringing baby Benjamin home from the hospital. Above right, Dad and son snuggle. At right, Benjamin struggles to survive while in an induced coma hooked up to a ventilator. Bottom left, Martha gives her newborn son a little love and attention to help him along. Far right top, a recovered Benjamin hangs on tight to mom's hand. Bottom far right, Benjamin takes it all in only six days after his life and death struggle began.

respond, they were mildly concerned. However, when Steve fell suddenly silent, Martha became seriously concerned. Typically, Steve would have nagged her about the baby constantly.

"Because I didn't ask again, Martha became more concerned. We were both out of character," he said. "By dinner, I really hadn't said anything and went to bed."

As for the typically placid Martha, she couldn't sleep and the baby had still not moved. At one point, her son Jonathan crawled into bed with her.

"I went to put Jonathan back in bed and when I got back, I tried to get the baby to respond again and still nothing," she said. "At that point I nudged Steve and said 'I'm calling the doctor.'"

Steve believes that was a critical moment for Benjamin. If Martha had rolled over and gone to sleep, chances are slim that Benjamin would be with us," Steve said.

The call was made and the doctors ordered Martha immediately to the hospital for testing. Initially, the attending nurses



Photos by Glenn Matlock and Steve Hill

could not hear a heartbeat. They ordered an ultrasound and discovered the child was not moving or breathing the fluid within the womb at regular intervals. The umbilical cord wasn't wrapped around his neck and there appeared to be no reason for the child to be responding in this manner.

"They finally found a heartbeat. We were relieved! At that point, we wondered if he was even alive," Steve said.

A decision was made to take the child through caesarean section. It was a risky call, but doctors felt the child would have a better chance surviving outside the womb, Steve said.

Shocked by what they saw on delivery, the medical team rushed the child out of the room without explanation and without allowing Martha to see him.

"Staff would say, 'oh, they're working with

him ... doing a good job,' she said. "They never told me how he looked, but I knew something serious was wrong because they wouldn't answer me. I'm lying on the table half numb. 'Would you tell me something?' I heard them call for O negative blood and then they took him out."

After communicating with the doctor for the first time, Steve found himself stepping through a minefield of medical jargon.

"We have a very sick child on our hands," the doctors told him. The doctor explained about anemia, blood, etc. He told Steve the family needed to prepare for severe mental impairment and severe movement impairment in the child.

"From my point of view, I looked down at the baby hooked up to a ventilator and lots of stuff and couldn't perceive the

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The Hill's strong Christian faith bouyed them throughout

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level of sickness the doctor was explaining. Things about circulation and how because there was no circulation that cells weren't able to release the toxins in the blood and now that they are being released they're releasing at the same time," Steve said.

Although Benjamin was moving well at this point, sudden lights or movement negatively impacted his oxygen levels. To sedate the child, the doctor induced a three-day coma and hooked the child up to their most powerful oscillating ventilator.

Through it all, Martha had God-given peace about Benjamin's prospects, she said.

"It is the most amazing thing I've experienced," she said. "I can tell you where it came from (God), but I can't explain it. I was just upset because I couldn't see Benjamin. I didn't see him for 14 hours. I couldn't hold him and I couldn't feed him. That was the hardest thing for me - the small stuff. The big stuff I had a peace about."

It was the Hill's strong Christian faith that buoyed them throughout, they said.

"There was one thought that carried me throughout the whole thing," Martha said. "Knowing that if I had waited a couple of hours he would have been dead. God chose to save him right at the point of death. That gave me the faith that He would bring about it

fully."

The Bible says God won't put more on you than you can bear, but I believe that He puts more than you think you can bear so you'll depend on His strength to get through it, Steve said.

"With God's help, I believe we can face anything Benjamin's future throws at us," he said.

The family asked members at their Gwinnett Vineyard Church to pray. E-mails began circulating wildly among church members. Steve provided everyone with daily updates complete with photographs. The e-mail spread far beyond the Vineyard to other church members who also prayed.

Benjamin's condition began to stabilize and the family was provided with another option regarding Benjamin's uncertain future - terminate treatment and pull the plug.

"That was probably the hardest moment of the whole experience for me - that the doctor told me I could kill my child," Martha said. "The doctor said, 'I wouldn't do it, but it's an option I have to present to you.' I can't even describe how it feels to even think about [killing my baby]."

We had already made our choice, but I think if they had pulled the plug, Benjamin still would have lived. He was determined, Steve said.

At the time, not everyone on the medical staff thought the Hills

had made the right choice, but six days after it all began, Benjamin had recovered enough to come off the ventilator. Steve felt he was strong enough to go home then.

"One of the nurses told me to my face ... she said 'among ourselves, we were fairly convinced you all didn't have all the information - that you made an uninformed decision when you chose to keep [Benjamin] alive. We were so convinced that you would be taking home a vegetable that would be tube fed the rest of his life - that he may be a cute baby now but he is going to be your size, Mr. Hill,'" Steve said.

Seeing the baby's miraculous recovery so amazed the nurse, she later told Steve she believed the baby was "marching toward the light. He was just about there, but someone told him to turn back." Despite the progress, she still had reservations and began to prepare the family for what might lay ahead. She told them to expect the child's recovery to take two steps forward and one step back. Just being a preemie is rough. Having all these other complications only makes it more difficult, she told the family.

But Benjamin had other plans. By day six, the anemia was no longer an issue. By day seven, "super baby" emerged from his cocoon of darkness. Little Benjamin never took one step backward, Steve said. After seven

days, he came off all ventilators, breathing on his own and acting like a normal baby - doing well, gaining a pound a day not on a bottle, but breast feeding.

Benjamin behaving like a normal baby - this was the "second miracle," the Hills pointed out.

"[An early recovery] was way above and beyond what they expected considering the severe oxygen deprivation. They can't explain it," he said. "He should have had massive kidney failure aside from more serious things like cerebral palsy, he should have had organ shutdown. He should have had cardiac failure.

"Every time I would go down there and hold Benjamin, a different nurse would poke her head in smile and say, 'it is just amazing.' One nurse and even one of his doctors called it 'a miracle.' There's not one nurse down in that unit that doesn't know they have seen something happen above and beyond. The Christian nurses know what happened. One Christian nurse told me, 'we need to see this every now and again. We need to know that God still works.'"

After enduring a brutal 17-day fight for life, Benjamin went home on April 27. As for his part, this six-pound caesarian baby - the preemie already "dead" or handicapped at best in the eyes of his medical caregivers - chose life. All he needed was professional medical care and the faith of a committed father and mother.

The Hills' prayers were answered, but there are those who may wonder why other children perish when just as many prayers are offered?

"God chose to save Benjamin; we don't know why," Steve said. "There are no seven steps to success with prayer and with faith that say if we take all the right steps we're going to get a programmed response from God. He doesn't work like a voodoo doll. You can't poke him in certain places and make him do things."

The Hills have no greater fears or expectations for Benjamin's future than they do their other two young children, Jonathan and Abigail. The Hill's have peace about the future, but understand they have to rely on God every step of the way.

This sense of peace is their third miracle, Steve said.

"Once we said, 'OK- God's will is that he live and we were committed to his life, it became apparent quickly that God was doing something. One of the verses I hung on to was "He who began a good work in you is faithful to complete it ... ;" Steve said.

"I saw that God began a good work in Benjamin. I would be really surprised - even though the doctors say only time will tell - if there is any permanent damage. And if there is, we'll be prepared with God's help to deal with that as well."