

Born Against the Odds

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Staff Writer

(March 25, 2008) When Bela Milne was only 20 weeks old, doctors discovered she had such severe congenital heart disease, they weren't sure if she would live or die. They suggested abortion, but her mother refused. Born on February 29, Bela not only survived, but successfully underwent a rare hybrid surgery at the tender age of seven days.

"She's a little angel, my miracle angel," said her 23 year old mother, Avery Milne to Hayley Mingle of Phoenix's *East Valley Tribune*. "The fact that she's here is incredible . . ."

Bela was born with a rare combination of Turner syndrome and hypoplastic left-heart syndrome. Turner syndrome occurs in only one out of every 2,500 female births. In hypoplastic left-heart syndrome, the left side of the heart is underdeveloped. Babies born with this syndrome become ashen, have rapid breathing and difficulty eating. Survival rates of infants born with this combination of heart abnormalities are minimal.

When Milne received this news at 20 weeks gestation, she and her husband, Tanner, were overwhelmed. "I cried for two weeks," she said.

Being people of faith, they knew they couldn't abort their baby. Instead, they were determined to give their child every possible chance to live.

Beginning at 20 weeks into the pregnancy, Milne began seeing her doctor every week; at 32 weeks, it was twice a week; at 36 weeks, she was at the doctors every other day.

During this time, doctors developed a plan for Bela's treatment after she was born.

The first operation would involve repairing the hypoplastic left heart syndrome with a procedure that combines open-heart surgery and interventional cardiology techniques. Doctors referred to the technique as "a hybrid approach" because it would be only the second time the surgery was ever performed in this way.

She will receive a second operation at six months of age, and a third surgery when she's between two and three years old.

Seven days after her birth, doctors performed the first procedure on Bela's heart, which was about the size of a walnut.

"She's doing amazing," her mother said on March 18, "way better than anyone expected."

After spending nearly a month in the hospital, mother and daughter were finally able to go home.

Dr. Stephen Pophal, chief of pediatric cardiology at St. Joseph's and one of the doctors who

operated on Bela, told the *Arizona Republic*, “For her to make it through that was defying the odds.”

A medical community that once proposed abortion is now fighting to give Bela a good quality of life. That’s quite an accomplishment for a baby born against the odds.

But her mother isn’t surprised. Bela’s heart may be tiny physically, but it’s a huge heart in terms of experience and fight for life.

“She’s here to bless people,” her mother said.

At just one month of age, Bela has already begun to fulfill that mission.

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