

Her Middle Name Was Mercy

Editor's note: This article came in first place of the three winners selected in the competition for Christian Life Missions' Walker Journalism Award. You can read more about the competition [here](#).

In the period of a few minutes, Kristi Eskelund's excitement at discovering she was pregnant with twins turned to confusion and fear. She recorded her doctor's words in her journal: "You just went from a no-risk pregnancy to an off-the-chart risk."

She tried to comprehend what he was telling her: Her twin girls were conjoined at the abdomen and— if the ultrasound reading was correct—it was possible they shared a heart.

Conjoined twins are a rare occurrence, about one in 200,000 live births, according to the University of Maryland. Between those who are stillborn and those who die a day after being born, the survival rate is only between 5 and 25 percent. Doctors told Kristi and Dave Eskelund that their daughters had a 60 percent chance of surviving birth, but it was hard to know what to expect after.

The doctors asked them whether they wanted to terminate the pregnancy. When Kristi objected, they urged her to reconsider, making abortion seem an easy option. But against much advice and uncertainty, Kristi decided to go forward with the pregnancy: "To me it has always been really clear that aborting the child is taking a life. I was honestly more afraid of that than whatever I might deliver... The only thing I could bank on was living with my own choices. And I knew that whatever I did next, I was going to have to look it in the face every single day of my life."

The Eskelunds sought prenatal care at Chapel Hill Hospital at

the University of North Carolina, where one of the surgeons had already performed a separation surgery, and rearranged their lives. Dave, a Marine, had been offered a much-desired tour of duty in Norway. Now, there was no telling what the girls' medical needs would be if they survived the pregnancy. Doctors still could not tell them if the girls had one heart or two. And they had three children at home to think about. Kristi and Dave prayed the twins would survive to the delivery.

On January 10, 2001, Kristi gave birth by Caesarian section. The medical team rushed the babies to NICU for treatment. Good news followed: The girls did not share a heart. The two hearts were next to each other, and beat in sync, but there were two of them. That meant separation was a plausible option.

The Eskelunds named the stronger baby Lydia because Lydia was a strong woman in the Bible. They added Joy for a middle name. They called the sicker baby Anneka, the Scandinavian derivative of Hannah. Kristi said they chose the name in part because Dave is of Scandinavian descent. But it had a deeper meaning for their family: "It was sort of Hannah's same situation, where, if we have this child, Lord, we're going to put her in Your hands, and we're going to put her in Your knew her life would be a mercy." Mercy became her middle name.

In the days following delivery, it became clear that the girls had to be separated once they were strong enough to survive the surgery. Tests revealed that they shared some bowels, and that most of the shared organs were inside Lydia.

Anneka's situation was grave. With fewer of the shared organs and serious heart defects, she could die if separated from Lydia—but she would surely die if she wasn't.

The successful separation surgery was followed by a long recovery. Over the following months, the Eskelunds and their girls lived at the hospital or the Ronald MacDonald House next

door, driving home occasionally to see their other children. Eventually, Dave moved back home, though he drove out to give Kristi a break now and then.

Lydia and Anneka captured the hearts of their surgeons. Nicknames taped on their monitors revealed their developing personalities: Lydia was "The Queen," and Anneka was "Tiny."

As the months wore on, it became clear that the girls were on different paths. Lydia grew stronger. Anneka became weaker. Lydia was discharged, though she still lived at the hospital with her mother. Anneka had more surgeries.

Despite the doctor's efforts, Anneka's health continued to decline. Kristi remembers the day she sat down with one of the nurse practitioners to face the fact that Anneka wasn't going to get better like Lydia had. Everyone had come to the realization that she wasn't going to live very long.

"It was such a precious, quiet realization for me and for a lot of us that every single day matters," Kristi said. "There was a sweetness about living every single day with her at the bedside and that we knew we weren't going to have very many of them. There was kind of this letting go."

Six months after delivery, the Eskelunds were home on a short respite when they received a phone call in the night. Anneka's liver had failed. They returned to the hospital, and there in a dark room, with only her parents and the surgeons who had worked so hard for her, Anneka died—exactly six months after her miraculous delivery. Kristi said she wouldn't have chosen anyone else to share the moment with than that small team of doctors who had become like family.

Twelve years later, Lydia is a normal girl with blue eyes and blonde hair. She likes singing, archery, American Girl dolls, and organizing parties for her friends. She is healthier than anyone would have predicted, with mild scoliosis and a place where her heart is unusually exposed.

The Eskelunds are still close friends with some of the surgeons who worked on Lydia and Anneka. Their willingness to live out their faith has given them unique witnessing opportunities:

“When people see you completely live out your convictions, and really put your money where your mouth is, it lends a lot of authenticity to your ability to speak the gospel message.” She said she would remind women considering abortion that doctors often give the worst scenario. While they may be right, God works miracles. Kristi says, “I would do it all again. I really would.”

Six years ago, Kristi returned to the same hospital to give birth—a surprise since she wasn’t supposed to be able to have more children. Some of the same nurses attended her when Jesse, a healthy son, came into the world. She called him her Job 42 baby, because after all the pain, God was giving it all back: “Being able to really rejoice in the situation after all the was so much of a coming-full-circle experience for me.”

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