One Chance

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It only takes a few seconds to fall in love with Frederick George.

The 13-month old coos quietly in his carrier, his long eyelashes offsetting big blue eyes, which occasionally focus on someone standing in the living room or one of his many toys.

To Georgia and Fred George, he is the perfect baby. But Freddie is a sick toddler who needs a small bowel and liver transplant and his life depends on another child.

Time is running out, but hope hasn’t.

He was born premature at 28 weeks on Feb. 12, 2003, at Pittsburgh’s Allegheny General Hospital. He weighed 2 pounds, 15 ounces. About six weeks later, Freddie developed necrotizing enterocolitis or N.E.C., which can occur in babies who go on formula. The disease eats the bowel and now Freddie has what is called short gut syndrome. The medicine used to treat the illness injured the liver.

“The bowel literally died,” Georgia, 39, said.

A bowel resection was done on March 27, 2003, when doctors told the Georges their son may not have much time left to live. Freddie was given last rites. But within seven days, he had surgery again and was ultimately transferred to Children’s Hospital in Pittsburgh. He came home for the first time May 1. Georgia’s actual due date was May 2.

Today, Freddie now weighs about 10 pounds compared to an average 13-month-old who weighs 15 to 20 pounds. A visiting nurse comes to the George’s home several days a week to assist with the care of Freddie, who has an intravenous line that goes into his chest, up into the carotid artery and routes down into the aorta.

The route to Children's Is deeply fixed in the minds of Georgia and Fred, 43. In the past year their son has spent about as much time at the medical facility as he has sitting contentedtly in his carrier at home. The couple figures they have made nearly 50 trips.

Infections and various complications including bleeding, anemia and respiratory problems force the Georges to sometimes drive to Pittsburgh every three to four days.

“The last year has been a roller-coaster ride,” Fred said.

Georgia calls it a nightmare.

“He’s been in the hospital more than he’s been out, but I wouldn’t trade him for the world.”

For Freddie, there’s just one chance. And that’s with a transplant.

Considered critical, he is on a transplant list, which covers Pittsburgh and the tri-state area.

Holding back tears and having gone without sleep for more than 20 hours, Georgia struggles to say the truth.

“Within three months, he must have a transplant.”

The Georges are aware of liver-bowel transplants using live organs, but know most of the time, the organs are from cadavers. As sad as it may be, Freddie’s parents said they believe people should be aware of donating the organs of an infant or child who does not survive from an illness or accident.

“That’s the fact,” Georgia said. “Our child’s life is dependent on the death of another family’s child.”

“How do you pray for something like that?” Fred questioned.

Yet, early this month, Georgia’s hope was raised when Dr. Jorge Reyes explained it is possible to use the organs from a 30-pound child on life support and adjust them to fit Freddie’s body.

“I think about it 24 hours a day. The doctors give us honest answers and we’re praying.”

Once suitable organs are found, which includes tissue typing and blood matches, the Georges have less than two hours to get to Children’s for the transplant.

“I really believe in organ donations involving children, and I never thought about them until I had Freddie,” Georgia said. “That’s the only thing that will save him.”

Fred said he believes if government took greater measures to help families pay for burial expenses of young children who die, organ donations could increase.

The nurse, Barb, who preferred her last name not be used, picked up Freddie whose yellow coloring comes from the damaged liver.

“He’s a precious little boy and a sick little boy,” the nurse said “He looks at you and you melt.”

If Freddie has a successful small bowel/liver transplant without rejection or infections, he will live a normal life, Fred said, as he opened the door to receive the medical supplies that are constantly delivered.

A close look at the collar on Georgia’s blouse reveals a small pin.

“That’s my little angel watching over me,” she said.

Conversation turned back to Freddie.

“He’s a very good baby. He’s an angel.”

For now, the Georges are taking it one day at a time, Fred said.

“We will hold onto hope until the very end.”