

Rockdale Citizen

Tiny miracle

Local aids N.Y. family

Karen Rohr

Features Editor

Sunday, July 06, 2008



Conor Ryan gives a big smile to his mother, Renee Ryan, and volunteer chaplain, Jane Caruso, at Rockdale Medical Center.

attempt to save the mother's life. He lay in an incubator in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit. Weighing just over 1 pound and having been born three and a half months early, the baby clung to life on a respirator.

Renee and her mother, Ophelia Livernois, had come to the area from their home town of Saranac Lake, NY, to watch Dorian graduate from the Georgia School of Construction in Conyers, where he'd just earned his crane operator's certificate.

"When the dad told me the story, I just wanted to run. This was just way too sad. I looked like a deer in the headlights," said Caruso.

But instead, Caruso stayed and visited with the family every day.

She procured funds to pay for an extended stay in a local hotel and for food, with help from the First Baptist Church of Conyers and donations from RMC nurses, and formed prayer groups, with staff from St. Pius X Catholic Church offering blessings at the hospital for mother and child.

"We had multiple denominations praying over my bed," said Renee.

One day, Caruso walked into the hospital room and saw a young woman she didn't recognize sitting up in bed. After eight days in a coma, Renee was conscious.

"From the minute she opened her eyes and mouth, we were connected," said Caruso.

On a Sunday morning in March, Conyers resident Jane Caruso decided to skip church and instead visit Rockdale Medical Center, where she serves as a volunteer chaplain. That decision led to a powerful bond with an upstate New York family who almost suffered the loss of a mother and child.

"I'm convinced we were supposed to meet," said Caruso.

That particular day, Caruso stopped in the ICU, as she routinely does, and noticed a young woman in a coma with her husband and mother at her bedside. The husband, Dorian Ryan, explained how his wife, Renee Ryan, had major organ failure and brain swelling as a result of complications from pregnancy. Their son was delivered prematurely by Caesarean section in an

Because Renee required kidney dialysis three times a week, for four hours a day, she stayed at RMC for an additional two weeks. She could see her son, whom her husband named Conor after Conyers, in the incubator, but she wasn't allowed to touch him. When the time came for her to return to New York, Renee asked Caruso if she would watch over the baby, whom doctors said was too fragile to be moved.

"It was getting to the point that Dorian and I had to come home for work. We needed money coming in," explained Renee. "I sat down with Jane and said, 'We've really become close to you, and I'd feel honored if you'd stand in for us so Conor is not so alone and he knows he has some support here,' and she said she'd be happy to."

"They wanted someone who would love their baby like they would, so they asked me if I would be their person, be their eyes and ears," said Caruso.

Caruso visited Conor every day and for two months she simply talked to him through the porthole. She also sang him "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

"He would have his eyes shut and I would say 'Hey Conor' and one of his eyes would open," she said.

Caruso sent photos and e-mails a few times a week to Renee, keeping her updated on his progress and milestones like thumb sucking and lifting his head. Renee said that between Caruso and the NIC nurses, she felt extremely informed about Conor, but as she began to regain her health, the reality of being away from her baby began to sink in.

"Jane was more of an emotional support. As I got better, I was feeling more upset about being away. She was really a foundation for me," said Renee.

For Mother's Day weekend in May, an RMC doctor paid for Renee and Dorian's flight and accommodations to visit Conor, who, the night before his parents arrived, had pulled out his respirator. Physicians put the baby on a respirator that inserted into his nose instead of throat.

Doctors finally gave the OK for the baby to come out of the incubator that weekend.

"I was the first one to hold him," said Renee, who recalls how painful it was to leave him and go back to New York.

From that point on, Caruso stepped in, feeding Conor his first bottle (he had been on a feeding tube), rocking him, singing and talking to him and changing his diaper. She'd stay for two hours at a time, or more.

"It didn't take me long to fall in love with that little guy. One night I was holding him and he smiled and it was not gas. It was a smile of contentment," said Caruso.

Both Caruso and Renee said that touching Conor, who had experienced mostly pokes and prods, was crucial for his health.

"I think it really made a difference. They need to know that touch is more than pain. There is loving touch," said Renee.

When Conor had been in the incubator as long as he would have been in his mother's womb, towards the end of June, doctors gave the green light for him, accompanied by his parents, to be flown home on a special medically equipped aircraft.

"I had mixed feelings. I was happy but sad," said Caruso.

Today, Conor is home with his family, weighs 6 pounds, 5 ounces, takes a bottle every few hours and is slowly being weaned off of oxygen. Renee said she is grateful to the RMC staff for saving both her life and her baby's. But she reserves special praise for Caruso, who will visit the Ryans in the fall.

"I would say Jane is our guardian angel," said Renee.

Contact Karen Rohr at karen.rohr@rockdalecitizen.com.