

# My Little Miracle

by Isabel Pereiras

In March 1991, after months of gynecological problems, a doctor informed me that I had suffered a miscarriage and gave me some medication. I had not even known that I was pregnant. I decided to get a second opinion and though the new doctor agreed with the first about the miscarriage, he recommended an ultrasound examination. The ultrasound amazingly revealed that I was going to have twins. It was the happiest day of my life when the radiologist announced, "Mrs. Pereiras, you are going to be a mommy!" I was ecstatic. My childhood dream was coming true!

Then in the sixth month of my pregnancy my dream became a nightmare. A second ultrasound revealed only one baby. A geneticist told us that the medication I had taken from the first doctor might cause the baby to be born with a limb length deficiency or a major organ dysfunction. I was concerned, yet hopeful because this only occurred in one child out of a thousand. It couldn't happen to me, I thought. After all, I had always led a healthy life, avoiding drugs, smoking and alcohol. Besides, my baby had already battled courageously thus far, holding on fiercely to survive. The Lord couldn't fail me now.

My little angel was born on December 28, 1991. A foreboding silence shrouded the delivery room at her birth, but was immediately interrupted by Caitlin's strong wails. The doctors instantly cleansed, tested and wrapped her

in a blanket. She was shown to me from afar and taken away a few seconds later by the pediatrician, with my husband in tow.

Gloom slowly fell over me, raising my guard and igniting my curiosity. I asked if my baby had all of her fingers and toes, and was answered with a hesitant yes. I didn't get to see my daughter until the following day. The pediatrician visited first and brought the tear-jerking news. Caitlin had been born with a congenital below-elbow amputation of her left arm. All of the concerns and doubts that I had previously eliminated came rushing back full force.

I wondered if perhaps the doctors had accidentally sliced her hand off. Of course, they had not, but I was looking for an explanation for why this had happened. I was speechless, and I felt confused and abandoned. I thought the Lord was always by my side. I cried from frustration, hurt and helplessness. "Why my baby?" I asked. Feelings of guilt invaded my mind and I wondered if perhaps I had done something wrong. Anger coursed through my veins as I wondered why the first doctor had given me medicine and if the medicine was to blame. I even thought that I was experiencing a terrible nightmare and that everything would be all right once I woke up.

Then, all of these feelings - all of the negativity, anger and depression - suddenly disappeared when I saw my precious little sleeping bundle. I held, touched, caressed, admired, smelled, tickled, examined and

cuddled the miracle in my arms. I couldn't believe she was all mine. I patted her stump, explored it and kissed it. It was the happiest moment of my life. I guess, deep down in my heart, I knew my baby would be special. What I didn't know was how much. Her first gift to me was a brilliant smile, as if she were saying, "I'm happy to be here in your arms, safe and sound. I love you, mom!"

My heart was mush at that moment. I knew then the glory and significance of being a mother and the true meaning of love.

Caitlin was going to be a breath of fresh air and an inspiration to everyone crossing her path. She was going to show me what determination and will power could accomplish and change my outlook on life. I was no longer going to take anything in life for granted. I was going to be thankful for what I had been blessed with and look at life with a positive attitude.

I think Caitlin's challenge has been harder on the adults of our family than on her. She seems to take everything so good-naturedly. Caitlin is an exceptional child. She talked at about 9 months of age, in a clear voice, in Spanish and then in English. She walked the day of her first birthday and could read at age 3. She is a friendly child with intellectual tendencies. She is mature for her age - 9 going on 20 with an answer for everything.

She received her first cosmetic prosthesis at 6 months, then proceeded to a manual prosthesis, which we call "helper." At age 3,

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she was introduced and trained on a one-site myoelectric prosthesis, then graduated to a two-site myoelectric prosthesis, which she wears to the present, courtesy of Shriners Hospital, a wonderful, dedicated hospital in Pennsylvania.

One of my toughest obstacles was handling people's reactions to her missing limb. At first, I was annoyed and discouraged by their pity, rude remarks and insensitive questions, but as time passed, it got to the point that we couldn't care less who watched, observed or pointed because her missing limb was such a natural thing to us.

A milestone in her life was the beginning of school. We spoke about all the children she would meet and how different everyone was. I spoke to her teacher a day before school started and explained what she could and could not do with her prosthesis. I also suggested that she have Caitlin introduce herself to her classmates, explain how her prosthesis worked and what it could do, and answer any questions they might have. This was a great icebreaker for her and eliminated the tirade of sporadic questions later on.

A memorable moment in Caitlin's life occurred when she was about 3 years old. We were at Shriners Hospital for her clinic appointment, and there were about a dozen children there who were missing an upper limb. Caitlin made a comment that shocked me and brought a silly smile to my face. She innocently ran up to a little girl, said hello, and then ran back to me and commented on the girl's missing arm. I guess she was amazed at the number of children who were just like her. We love to go to Shriners Hospital because

it's a little world where everyone is perfect and the ones outside are the different ones.

Caitlin is usually cheerful, but at times she experiences moments of depression, which we call "blue moods." They rarely occur, but when they do, they bring with them a flood of tears and difficult questions. Usually, they begin in school when something or someone triggers them. The last time this occurred, a jump rope was the cause. Her friends would not allow her to jump rope because she didn't know how. She came home that afternoon depressed and teary-eyed, asking why she was born without a hand. We patiently listened to what she had to say and then decided that honesty was the best policy. We told her that we didn't know why she was born without a hand, and we explained that the Lord wouldn't give us something we couldn't handle. We tried to make her understand that sometimes we have to work a bit harder to get things accomplished than other people do. After a good cry, she stopped and resolutely began her comeback. She realized that jumping rope was the problem, and her solution was to practice and excel at it. Her dad then made a special jump rope for her, and she has been jumping rope ever since.

I cannot help the feelings of awe and amazement every time I see Caitlin jumping rope or tying her shoelaces with speed and ease. She is a perfectly normal, mischievous girl who slyly tries to use her missing arm to get out of punishment or to get her way. Of course, this doesn't work. We treat her like any other child - no special treatment or privileges. At our home, "no, won't and can't" are

obliterated from our vocabulary. She is extremely independent, a bit headstrong, and focused on her future. She talks about becoming a kindergarten or first-grade teacher when she grows up. She practices every day with her sister, who is in the first-grade. When asked why she chose these grades, she said that these years are the most important for producing successful readers. Caitlin is an A+ student in a wonderful Catholic school, and she writes for the school newspaper, participates in the checker club, and loves to bowl, sing, read, and write. She has pen pals all over the United States, thanks to a beautiful, caring organization called Superkids.

One day a customer came into my husband's hardware store and asked for three four-foot fluorescent light bulbs. After the man paid, my husband wondered why he was having difficulty carrying the lights and leaving the store. Twenty minutes later, the same man returned to buy another item, and my husband realized that he was missing his left arm. The point is that most people are not focused on our problems, however obvious they may seem to us. Most people do not really notice or care whether my daughter has an arm or not. When she was a baby, I thought that everybody would be staring at her and asking questions, but it was actually me who was fixated on the subject.

My advice for anyone with a special child is to always tell them the truth when asked a question, love them just the way they are, help them learn to love and accept their body, encourage them to see the positives in life, and never dwell on their differences.

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