

Holy Little Saint – a story of hope, healing - and miracles

By Debi Vinnedge

When friends set up Lisa Schuenemann on a blind date with Mike Brown in January of 1999, the last thing she was looking for was a future husband. Lisa had recently moved to the Tampa Bay area and was busy setting up her chiropractic office and preparing to buy her first home.

So, beginning a relationship with anyone was the furthest thing from her mind. But after a lot of badgering from her friends, she reluctantly agreed to meet him. Much to her surprise, she was instantly attracted to Mike's kindness, his sense of humor and deep spirituality.



They were married on May 26, 2001 at Christ the King Church in Tampa. As a young couple bound by their deep love for each other and a mutually profound Catholic faith, they settled into married life, eagerly planning their future family together.

On August 8th, 2003 Lisa and Mike were blessed with the birth of their first son, Samuel Thaddeus. Overwhelmed with joy, life was perfect for the Browns. But it would be the strength of their love and faith that was about to see them through the toughest time of their lives.

Mike & Lisa with Finn Xavier (in red), Samuel Thaddeus, (oldest), and Gianna Maria – July 2010

In 2006, Lisa and Mike were overjoyed to discover they were expecting their second child. But at 10 ½ weeks into the pregnancy, a routine ultrasound would reveal the tragic news that their baby had a rare genetic disorder called Trisomy 18. Normally, there are 23 pairs of human chromosomes but in Trisomy 18 there is an extra chromosome with the 18th pair.

Unlike Down Syndrome, which also is caused by a chromosomal defect, Trisomy 18 causes major medical complications that are life-threatening such as kidney and heart malformations. 50% of babies who are carried to term will be stillborn. Of those who survive birth, most will die in the first month of life and only 5-10% will live through their first year.

Lisa and Mike sat numbly as her doctor explained the diagnosis and then proceeded to offer the abortion drug, RU486 as an immediate "solution" to their problem. They flatly refused. Reeling with the knowledge their baby may not survive through the pregnancy, much less after birth, Mike and Lisa began to pray as they had never done before.

They began looking into everything they could find on Trisomy 18 and any faith-based organizations that might be able to offer support. Finding none, Lisa sought counsel from a dear priest-friend.

She listened with disbelief as he told her she needed to weigh her decision very carefully. What sort of life would her baby have even if by some miracle he somehow survived? What sort of life would she and Mike have? Were they prepared for a child that had no chance of survival? With heavy heart he gently told her that under the circumstances it would be understandable if she decided not to bring her

baby to term. It was not the response Lisa had expected. Nor was it what he should have told her. The Church teaching on unborn babies with a fatal diagnosis is clear:

The USCCB Committee on Doctrine drawing from both the Ethical & Religious Directives for Health Care and Evangelium Vitae states:

"The rights of a mother and her unborn child deserve equal protection because they are based on the dignity of the human person whatever the condition of that person. Consequently, it can never be morally justified to directly cause the death of an innocent person no matter the age or condition of that person...Hence, it is clear that before "viability" it is never permitted to terminate the gestation of a child ... Nor is such termination permitted after "viability" if early delivery endangers the child's life due to complications of prematurity...The Ethical and Religious Directives remind us that the directly intended termination of a pregnancy before viability constitutes a procured abortion and is never permitted."

It was what Lisa should have been told by the priest. It was in fact, exactly what she needed and wanted to hear – a confirmation of what she already knew in her heart. But without the support of her Church and her doctor, Lisa was more confused than ever. What if the doctors are wrong, she asked herself? And what if they're not? Did it really matter? The questions weighed heavily on her heart.

But further Chorionic Villus Sampling (CVS) tests at 13 weeks in which a small section of the placenta is removed, confirmed the diagnosis. Over the next several weeks, more ultrasounds revealed the many problems their tiny son would have that would not allow him to survive. Again, her doctor strongly advised her to terminate the pregnancy and again, they refused.

Those were dark days for the Brown family. Feeling utterly lost, alone and without hope, Mike and Lisa continued to pray and search for the support they so desperately needed. In what she describes as the first of many answers to their prayers, she stumbled across a website called "Be Not Afraid." (See side bar) After reading the information from this Catholic-based group, Lisa said it was the confirmation she needed as they humbly knelt in total submission and pronounced the words together: "Thy will be done".

They began searching for a suitable name for this special little son and ultimately chose "Nevan" which is an Irish name meaning "holy little saint".

"How perfect!" Lisa would tell this writer later. *"The mental anguish of carrying a baby whom the world deemed 'worthless' was a cross that we bore sadly but proudly. For Nevan meant something to us and more importantly, he meant something to God. Each day we cried and celebrated each kick and movement. We were unsure if Nevan would live through birth or when God would choose to bring him home."*

One thing was certain, Lisa and Mike knew in their hearts this child had a special purpose.

Unfortunately, it seemed nearly impossible to convince anyone else. Even the perinatologist gave them no recommendations for support groups. And the genetic counselor whom her doctor had referred them to for help, to this date has never called the Browns back.

But as the weeks went by, the Holy Spirit worked powerfully as they met Jane Parker of Suncoast Hospice's Perinatal Division who Lisa describes as the "angel" who would later help them in their time with Nevan.

At 31 ½ weeks into her pregnancy- just 4 days prior to Sam's 3rd birthday, Lisa went into labor and immediately headed to Bayfront Medical Center in St Petersburg where she gave birth to Nevan Michael who was born alive. Without question, he was absolutely precious and perfect in their eyes.



Mike and Lisa with their OB/GYN and doula Jane Parker

He was immediately baptized, held, loved and cherished in the short one hour of his life.

Meanwhile, their doula, Jane Parker stood by them the entire time and as the doctor examined little Nevan, another photo was taken that would soon confirm their faith, their hope and their trust in God.

Nevan's Baptism picture

Back home from the hospital on their son Sam's birthday, Lisa was both physically drained and emotionally exhausted. Quietly, she stole away from their son's celebration and again went to her knees in tears, begging God for a sign that little Nevan was in His care. In her immense sorrow she prayed God would help make sense out of what seemed such a senseless loss. Her answer was about to come in a most unexpected way.

It was delivered in the photo that had been taken of Nevan in the hospital right before he died.



In the somewhat groggy aftermath of her delivery Lisa had thought she noticed a very faint image of what appeared to be broken blood vessels in the shape of a cross on Nevan's tiny chest. But when Jane brought her the untouched picture, she gasped and cried out loud at the sight of the obvious cross emblazoned next to Nevan's heart.



Doctor holds a light to Nevan's chest to check his heartbeat

Perhaps little Nevan's purpose was the conversion of the priest's heart or the doctors who could offer no medical explanation for the incredible image. Today Lisa's doctor still carries Nevan's picture and tell others how he has changed her life forever.

Or perhaps it was the work that Lisa now does, in helping to counsel other women who are going through difficult pregnancies and facing the same fears she did. In any case, whatever God's purpose is for Nevan, Mike and Lisa know they have been richly blessed.

"We received the best gift a parent can hold in their heart- we became parents of a saint!"



Nevan's gravesite at Calvary Catholic Cemetery, St Petersburg, FL

Lisa writes: "*The medics do not tell you about the option of carrying a baby to term and how rewarding and healing it is for the family and the right decision for the precious baby. It is a disgrace that no one speaks of this- we had to hunt it down. I don't want other parents to go through what we did and Be Not Afraid will help them avoid a lot of heartaches!*"



Be Not Afraid www.be notafraind.net adheres to the moral guidelines and ethical directives of the Catholic Church regarding sanctity of life issues without compromise.

In most cases, parents are not given adequate information by their doctor or genetic counselors. When the diagnosis involves fetal defects, parents can be made to feel that continuing with the pregnancy is not a legitimate option. Even during the screening process, as with Lisa and Mike, doctors pressure parents to abort without a confirming diagnosis of the problem.

Whether or not the baby will survive or have disabilities is inconsequential. The only authentic Christian response is that the diagnosis doesn't matter. The baby has inherent dignity as a human being created by God.

Be Not Afraid provides a full birth plan that includes preparation for whatever the outcome may be, hospital visits and consulting with surgeons to be on hand if the baby needs immediate care at birth. They offer to have a staff member present upon delivery and they even provide hand crocheted caps, booties, baptismal gowns and blankets for the babies.

Be Not Afraid!



Offering Hope, Resources and Help!

For More Information Contact Monica Rafie info@benotafrican.net