



FACING the **FEARS** of an **Adverse** Prenatal Diagnosis

By Amber Dolle

They were expecting a routine ultrasound at 19 weeks of pregnancy. Mary and Don Kellett were not concerned as they waited to watch their 11th child on the monitor. And never could they have imagined that this baby would offer such hope and encouragement not only to their family, but to countless families worldwide.

The doctors saw a child with markers that indicated a chromosomal disorder, most likely trisomy 18. Conversely, Mary and Don saw a beautiful baby boy made in the image and likeness of God. The specialists depicted a lifetime of sadness and suffering if this baby survived outside of the womb. But the Kelletts envisioned a child loved by his parents, adored by his siblings and protected by God.

Mary's doctors suggested an amniocentesis, a surgical procedure used to obtain amniotic fluid by inserting a needle through the abdominal wall. Despite the risk of miscarriage, the doctors insisted that amniocentesis was needed to solidify a diagnosis and offer the Kelletts more "choices." Mary and Don immediately refused. Abortion, no matter the euphemism used to describe it, was never an option.

"Regardless of what they told us, we believed that there is a place in this world for every person," said Mary. "We never once considered anything but life for our child."

Following the ultrasound, the Kelletts managed to go on with their lives. Don went to work while Mary managed their large family. They prayed through their fear and trusted in the Lord. "There is a great peace in accepting God's will," said Mary. "We loved this child just as we loved our other 10 children—unconditionally."

At 34 weeks of pregnancy, the baby quit moving and was delivered by Caesarean section. Baby Peter was baptized immediately and confirmed two days later by an archdiocesan chaplain, Father Jim Livingston. Shortly after birth, they learned that he did indeed have full trisomy 18. The Kelletts

were overcome with fear of the unknown and looked to the medical staff for support.

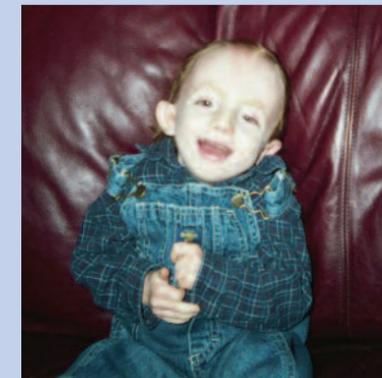
"Sadly, we were urged by many to simply let our son die," recalled Mary. "We were told that he would have no 'quality of life' and would suffer through his short time on this earth. It was made clear that Peter's life simply wasn't worth the cost to the hospital, to us or even to society. Hearing this was like a stab in my heart."

Mary and Don believed their son's life had a purpose, even if he only lived a few hours. They soon took Peter home and showered him with the love and attention that any child deserves. "Once we got Peter home, he began to thrive," said Mary. "He was safe in our arms and has been here ever since. He is now a happy three-and-a-half-year-old who loves music and loves the Bible. He continues to have challenges, and is both physically and mentally delayed. He cannot walk and doesn't speak, but he has a tremendous quality of life. We cherish every single day we have with Peter. Other than our Catholic faith, he is the best gift we have ever received."

The fruits of love

The support the Kelletts received after Peter's prenatal diagnosis and birth was overwhelming. "The love, encouragement and compassion everyone showed kept us going during those tough times and still does today," said Mary.

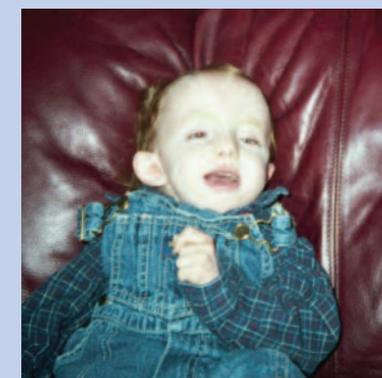
In the year following Peter's birth, Mary thought about their journey that began with an adverse prenatal diagnosis, recalling the fear she and her husband felt and realizing that other parents in sim-



Peter Kellet, "a happy three-and-a half year-old"



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Mary Kellett and her son Peter

ilar situations likely experience that same despair. After hearing an inspirational homily, Mary knew it was time to take action. She felt God's call to start Prenatal Partners for Life.

Much like our Blessed Mother's *fiat*, Mary Kellett said yes to God's call. "I had no idea how this was to be, but I knew God was telling me to go forward and that He would lead me," said Mary. With no experience in running a nonprofit organization—and little knowledge of even working a computer—Mary began her mission with unquenchable zeal. She sought counsel from priests, put together a dedicated board of directors and began to meet the needs of families experiencing the trials and struggles she understood all too well.

"I wanted to start a support group for families that took away the fear and replaced it with the love of Jesus," said Mary. "We were shown that love and the healing power it brings... Prenatal Partners for Life truly is a fruit of the love our

family received through Peter's situation. That love just keeps growing and multiplying."

Bringing hope in time of despair

Through its informative web site, e-mails, phone calls and personal contact, Prenatal Partners for Life meets the physical and spiritual needs of families facing difficult situations. The organization stresses the beauty of all children, regardless of their special needs and never condones abortion in any situation. While the group is faithful to the Catholic Church's teachings on respecting human life and has loving priests as advisors, they are ecumenical in nature and will turn no one away.

Once a request for assistance is made, the group matches families

who have received an adverse prenatal diagnosis with families who have a child, living or deceased, with a similar condition. "We take each request on a case-by-case basis," explained Mary. "We work to personalize our attention to each individual request that comes in." The sharing of experiences between families offers hope and encouragement as well as accurate information about the diagnosis.

"Oftentimes the doctors choose to focus on the negative," explained Mary. "We want to accentuate the positive by focusing on the unconditional love these kids offer. From a worldly perspective, an adverse diagnosis or special needs child brings sadness; from an eternal perspective, they bring beautiful opportunities for growth. These children are pure love."

Mary's vision could not have been realized at a more crucial time as the number of preborn babies aborted due to prenatal genetic testing continues to rise. According to information available through the National Institutes of Health, about 90 percent of pregnant women given a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome abort their children. Statistics for children with spina bifida, trisomy and other genetic disorders are equally frightening.*

"Mary has forged a new vein in the gold mine of respect life ministries," said Father Mark Juettner, pastor of Saint Raphael's Church in Crystal, Minnesota. Father Juettner, along with Father Jim Livingston, serves as spiritual

advisor for Prenatal Partners for Life. "This is a ministry that fills in a gap that was not being attended to and is in great need, on both the diocesan and national levels."

Prenatal Partners for Life has been instrumental in helping families find doctors and hospitals to care for special-needs children. Volunteer moms make gifts that are sent free of charge, especially to expectant parents who have received an adverse diagnosis. They make home and hospital visits, prepare meals for families, provide childcare for siblings, offer emergency grants and occasionally help with funeral costs. The group also hosts prayer showers by offering a Mass and special prayers for the family, followed by a meal. They recently collaborated in a national billboard campaign featuring Down syndrome babies. The support, both physical and emotional, does not stop once these children are born.

"It is important for those faced with an adverse diagnosis to know that they are not alone," said Father Juettner. "We often see parents who are trying to stand firm, even when everyone else is urging the 'quick fix': abortion. With the grace of God and the example of people like Mary, these parents can gain the courage to take that step toward protecting their child."

Making a difference, one family at a time

Joann and Dave Pilon have experienced first-hand the support offered by Prenatal Partners for Life. Like the Kelletts, the Pilon were at a 19-week ultrasound with their third child when they received their adverse prenatal

diagnosis. "It was unsettling how the medical staff reacted to our child's condition," recalled Joann. "It was insinuated that everyone would *understand* if we aborted our child so that we could move on to another one. It was terrifying."

Providentially, the Pilon were also members of Saint Raphael's Church and knew the Kelletts. After the unexpected news soaked in, Joann called Mary seeking prayers and advice. "Knowing Mary gave us strength," said Joann. "She put hope back in our lives. The hope and love she showed us were crucial."

Through much prayer and support, Joann made it to her 27th week of pregnancy. Just three days after the prayer shower for the Pilon, their daughter Grace was born. She lived just one hour after her birth. Like Peter, Grace suffered from a trisomy disorder.

"She was beautiful," said Joann. "She made the cutest little squeak when she was born. Our other children were there, and we all held her and told her goodbye."

Baby Grace Pilon, just after birth



It was a difficult journey, but we knew God was with us every step of the way. We also knew that we could depend on Mary and Prenatal Partners for Life."

The Pilon are just one of hundreds of families Prenatal Partners for Life has helped. "God is faithful," said Mary, "and Peter is the perfect example of that. Just as the Lord said that a child shall lead them, he [Peter] and all children with special needs are leading us closer to the Lord. They truly are teachers of our souls."

For more information, visit www.prenatalpartnersforlife.org, write to Prenatal Partners for Life, P.O. Box 2225, Maple Grove, MN 55311 or call 763-772-3868.

Amber Dolle is a freelance writer from McKinney, Texas. For more information on this topic, see the book review of *My Child, My Gift* on page 46.

E-mail this article from our web site www.clmagazine.org.

*C. Mansfield and others, "Termination rates after prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome, spina bifida, anencephaly, and Turner and Klinefelter syndromes: a systematic literature review. European Concerted Action: DADA (Decision-making After the Diagnosis of a Fetal Abnormality)," *Prenatal Diagnosis* 19(9), (September 1999): 808-12, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10521836?dopt=AbstractPlus> (accessed July 2008).