

Our Easter Miracle

From a very early age we knew our son Gabriel had developmental delays. At about 16 months his development was significantly behind that of his twin sister Katrina. Thus began the quest to discover the nature and origin of the delays so that we could care for our son and support him in the best way possible. For years we met with various doctors and specialists in the medical community. We learned a bit about the nature of his delays however, we never got to the origin.

The Milton public school system was great in providing services to Gabriel. At age 3 he entered pre-school and the EEE program. His communication skills were significantly delayed along with other developmental challenges. He received great care and special services all throughout his school years.

Around age 5 we stopped working with doctors who only seemed to want to draw blood and run tests. Gabriel was not a fan of the needles. We continued to explore with specialists in the education arena. In February of 2008, when Gabriel was 8 years old, we had a parent meeting with an Autism specialist. After the meeting we scheduled an evaluation for Gabriel in early March which went well. We were eager to have the discussion on the results. Instead something unexpected happened.

Tina: On Friday, March 7th the school called me to come pick up Gabriel as he was not feeling well. When I arrived his dedicated aid informed me that there was an incident with Gabriel. Apparently he had crawled under a table in the classroom and would not come out. This was very unusual for him. His classmates, who always embraced and cared for him, were trying to coax him to come out. After about 15 minutes he did slowly come out from under the table. At that age Gabriel had very limited communication skills and even to this day cannot express his feelings verbally. He could answer basic yes/no questions and that was all. Nothing appeared to be wrong so I thanked her for calling me and I brought Gabriel home.

Tina: Gabriel did show signs of illness for the next few days and was not recovering so on Tuesday morning (3/11/2008) I called the doctor and got an appointment for later that morning. The appointment was very short and the result was they told me to take Gabriel to the Emergency Room at the hospital. I called Paul at work so he could get Gabriel's sisters after school and meet us at the hospital.

Paul: I arrived at the hospital at about 4pm with the girls. Tina and Gabriel were still awaiting information on what was going on and what was next. We ate at the hospital while we waited. Around 6pm they informed us that they had Gabriel scheduled for an MRI to take place around 8pm. We realized this could be a bit of a crisis situation and I am better at dealing with that than Tina. So Tina took the girls home and I stayed with Gabriel at the hospital planning to keep Tina informed as things progressed.

Paul: At about 7pm Gabriel and I began preparing for the MRI. I continually told him what we would be doing and he took it in stride. I was a bit concerned about how he would react in the MRI chamber as I was informed that it makes loud noises. Gabriel has very sensitive ears and does not like loud noises. Gabriel would need to be very still during the test since even small movements would invalidate the results. The medical staff informed me the test would only take about 20 minutes and they could give him a sedative to help keep him calm. Instead of the sedative I was allowed in the MRI room with Gabriel.

Paul: I was so intent on providing comfort to Gabriel during the test that the test did only feel like 20 minutes and Gabriel never moved. He was a trooper. However, when we emerged from the MRI room, after two hours of testing, the staff informed me that Gabriel had suffered a Right Cerebral Infarction, more commonly known as a stroke. They had performed extra scans which showed that he also had a Left Cerebral Infarction around the age of three. I didn't know what the MRI was going to reveal, but I never expected to hear the word stroke. Yet it did not phase me. I remember thinking that I need to tell Tina.

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Paul: Things began to move very quickly at that point. I was informed that Gabriel was being admitted to the hospital and that I was welcome to stay with him overnight. I immediately called Tina to inform her what was happening. I wasn't quite certain how to tell her this over the phone as I would have much preferred to do this in person so I could hold her in my arms. I called Tina and told her over the phone and she cried only for a moment and immediately felt comforted by the Holy Spirit and knew that we would get through this. Though we were apart we felt God holding us together and giving us strength for our son.

Paul: Gabriel and I didn't get any sleep that night. It was a constant stream of doctors and nurses into the room checking on him, asking questions, checking on him more, asking the same questions. Tina got the girls off to school and came to the hospital on Wednesday (3/12) to trade places with me. I squared things away at work and began notifying friends and family. I managed things at home with the girls and got lots of help from St. Ann parishioners while Tina remained at the hospital with Gabriel. I was going to the hospital nearly every day so we could all be together and get updates on the situation.

After a few days the doctors decided Gabriel was stable, but had lost some motor skills. We agreed that Gabriel should receive intense rehabilitation for at least two weeks at Franciscan Hospital for Children in Boston. Tina and Gabriel were transported by ambulance on Monday (3/17), the beginning of Holy Week.

Tina: Gabriel spent Holy Week receiving hours of various types of therapy every day. The care was amazing and Gabriel enjoyed all the "play time" and attention. He drove a toy car, swang on his belly to push himself and grab a ball, peddled a merry-go-round and more. On Easter Sunday Paul and the girls attended the Masses at St. Ann and then drove down to Boston so we could spend Easter together. Jade, Gabriel's oldest sister, fondly remembers having wheelchair races in the halls. Gabriel and I were able to participate in Easter Mass at the hospital. Gabriel was not allowed to leave the hospital, but since he was doing so well and making great progress he was given special permission to leave. It was a beautiful day so we walked as a family to a nearby restaurant and had a wonderful Easter dinner together before Paul and the girls began their drive home. Gabriel and I remained one more week to complete his therapy.

When Gabriel returned home everything about him was different. Before the stroke he would walk very slowly everywhere he went. After he was mister speedy, we could hardly keep up with him. His motor skills had improved, his communication skills had improved, everything seemed different and everyone noticed.

Gabriel was evaluated again by the Autism specialist after his recovery. She identified him as being on the Autism scale but her scores showed dramatic improvement compared with the evaluation before the stroke. The school had also performed evaluations before the stroke and again following and those scores were also dramatically improved.

Who would think that an 8 year old would have a stroke. We learned it is rare, but childhood stroke is a reality. Gabriel continues to have delays and communication challenges even today, but he is the most pure and kind soul you will ever meet. Gabriel is a blessing to us and everyone who takes the time to know him. We were blessed in this entire event of his stroke, God carried us through it. In some ways this was like the crucifixion and resurrection. Gabriel endured the trial of the stroke and was a new person after. Our own little Easter story, our Easter Miracle.

Autism **Always Unique, Totally Intelligent, Sometimes Mysterious (describes Gabriel perfectly)**