

Mom's death leaves dad to care for newborn twins

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Every kindergartner had a special gift to open.

Long before the Christmas party at Frayser Elementary School, Carrie Godbey helped children in her class print wish lists. Then she found a way to get at least one item on each list.

Family and friends helped. So did neighbors. Carrie's husband, Lawrence, asked co-workers at ResCare to chip in.

More than 96 percent of the children at Frayser are at-risk. Carrie knew the classroom party was the highlight of Christmas for many of them.

Carrie had a wish, too—children of her own. When specialists said that would never happen, the young couple looked into adoption. They created portfolios, filled out forms, and bought a house to fill with children some day.

In the meantime, both volunteered in Children's Ministry at Southeast. Lawrence liked to work with a different age group every year. Carrie, 29, stayed with the first-graders. Jo Campbell, who works in Southeast's Elementary Ministry, said their time with the kids made a difference.

"The kids Carrie taught in kindergarten are now fourth- and fifth-graders," she said. "Carrie was so special that they'd stop by her class to see her every week. Her love for the kids and Jesus always showed through."

In November 2004, Carrie learned she was pregnant with twins. She called them her "miracle babies."

Doctors knew Carrie had Turner's Syndrome, a condition that can affect any organ of the body. In Carrie's case, the aortic valve on her heart had two leaflets instead of three. Though cardiac tests indicated it would not create complications, Smith worried about her daughter's health.

"Since Carrie was 12 years old, I always took precaution after precaution on everything she did," Smith said. "I worried about her through the pregnancy, but all the way along, Carrie believed it was God's plan for her life."

Mother and daughter decorated the nursery and dreamed of all the things they'd do with the babies. Smith promised to take them every Friday night so Lawrence and Carrie could go on a date.



JENN DUNCAN/THE SOUTHEAST OUTLOOK
Days are busy as Lawrence Godbey cares for his twins, Sydney Elizabeth, left, and Matthew Logan.

On June 25, six weeks before Carrie's due date, a back ache signaled the beginning of labor. They checked in at the hospital at 9 p.m. Contractions were normal. Chest pain was not. Doctors discovered that the inner layer of the aorta's artery walls was tearing. Family members were concerned but didn't understand that Carrie's life was in danger.

The babies were delivered by C-section at 4:25 and 4:26 the next morning. Lawrence said it was the happiest moment of their lives.

"We heard each of them cry and knew the babies were OK," he said. "Carrie wasn't able to hold the babies, but I held them close to her face so she could kiss them."

Logan weighed 3 pounds, 14 ounces. Sydney weighed 4 pounds, 2 ounces. Both were small but healthy. The new family enjoyed a little time together.

Since Carrie hadn't slept all night, family members gathered in the waiting room so she could rest.

About 1 p.m., a nurse told them Carrie's heart had stopped. She died nine hours after her twins were born.

Lawrence took the babies home from the hospital three weeks later. He never imagined caring for two newborns alone or thought of himself as "Mr. Mom." He'd fed and changed nieces and nephews, but he'd never made formula or cared for babies around the clock.

Co-workers at ResCare donated sick days and vacation time so he could stay home with the babies until Jan. 2, 2007.

Days begin before dawn as the babies let Lawrence know it's time to get up. He gives each a few special minutes of one-on-one time as he gets them out of their cribs.

Though Logan was the smallest at birth, he's surpassed Sydney in the last few months. Now five months old, the babies chatter and roll over, play and laugh. Lawrence has learned to shuffle blankets, pacifiers, doctor appointments, grocery shopping and baby food. He said it would have overwhelmed him without the support of family and friends.

Smith and her husband, Bruce, stop by every day after work to feed the twins, and kept their promise to keep the twins every Friday night to give Lawrence a break.

Teachers at Carrie's school continue to check in every month to see if Lawrence needs diapers, formula, clothes or meals. There's still a stack of gift cards in Lawrence's wallet. Everyone tells Lawrence the first Christmas is the worst. He isn't sure. He's been through a long series of "firsts" since June 26.

Being with family in Missouri made Thanksgiving bearable. He'll spend Christmas with Carrie's family.

Two truths keep Lawrence going through tough times. "I know Carrie's enjoying heaven, and I know God has a plan for all of us. This isn't about me. I choose to make every day good. We're not the first ones to go through this."

Carrie's principal, Terri Durham, said teachers and students at Frayser still miss Carrie—especially as they plan classroom Christmas parties. "But we also know this—if Carrie had to choose, she'd give her life for her babies," she said.