

LIFESTYLES

Walking miracle

Despite numerous operations, Billy just wants to be like any other kid

BY ABIGAIL WOLFORD
Staff Writer

Billy Bridges' Christmas wish is to play basketball on January 4. With his own willpower, hope, and faith, perhaps that will be possible.

Billy was born with Ellis Van Creveld syndrome, a rare and deadly birth defect that causes a dwarfed stature, extra fingers and toes, and numerous other problems. Most children born with the disease die before the age of two. Billy is eleven.

Billy is a walking miracle. Literally. When he was born, the doctors told his grandparents that he would neither walk or talk. He does both, and he even plays basketball on a Township No. 3 Peewee team. Then they told his family that he would not ever be able to go to school. He attends Township Three Elementary School half-day and makes A's and B's.

Billy still gets tired easily and is limited in the number of minutes he can play in a basketball game because of his chest and breathing problems. Billy has asthma and chronic bronchitis. "He's well one minute and the next real sick with no warning," said Helen Barnett, his grandmother. Billy lives with his grandparents.

Billy's latest battle to fight is his knee. His family began to notice that when his knee popped, it sounded like a gunshot. On Monday, December 16, Billy went in for yet another surgery to have his knee repaired. The surgery took about three hours, said Barnett, a former Kings Mountain nurse.

Because of all the swelling in his knee, the doctor was unable to finish the surgery. He did manage to clean and scrape around the bone to remove some of the calcium deposits, said Barnett. However, the procedure will probably have to be repeated in 7-8 months.

The knee surgery is just one of many surgeries that Billy has had in his lifetime. He had four major operations on his bowels and several operations on his ears when he was younger. He still has trouble hearing out of his left ear, he said. He also had his extra fingers and toes removed. Someday, said Barnett, he will probably have to have surgery on his hips.

He has come a long way, though. Billy spent the first 9-1/2 months of his life in intensive care at Carolina Medical Center. He no longer has to carry oxygen and a wear a breathing tube, items which kept him home bound for several years. Now he is able to go to school. He loves to read, said Barnett. Before his knee

surgery, he also had his trips to rehab down to only once a week. Until his knee heals, he will have to go twice a week again, he said.

Billy has trouble gaining weight, one of the marks of his illness. He is a picky eater, with many allergies, which does not help the situation either, said Barnett. The doctors told her to let him eat whatever he wants whenever he wants it. He just has to eat. Billy likes homemade macaroni and cheese, which he even eats for breakfast, said Barnett. It takes a lot of food for Billy to gain any weight, said Barnett.

Despite Billy's health problems, he does extremely well. He is involved in his church, Putnam Memorial Baptist Church, the members of which have been with him every step of his journey, said Barnett. They saw him with and without all of his tubes, she said. Many of them came to his house to sing to him on Wednesday, December 18.

"Billy wants to be like any other kid," said Barnett. "He's got a lot of friends. God put him here for a reason, and a lot of love goes with it. We never dreamed he'd play ball. We knew he had a lot of willpower. God has really been good to us." Every time Billy got to play during the basketball games last season, the crowd would cheer, and the team would play extra hard, said Barnett.

"People would cheer. They'd just stand up and holler," she said.

After his surgery last Monday, Barnett took Billy to see his teammates for a few minutes at their basketball practice. One of his coaches, Wayne Logan, came to see him in the recovery room at the hospital. One of his teammates has an artificial leg, and he has already volunteered to help push Billy in his wheelchair when he goes back to school after Christmas break.

Billy is aware of how precious his life is and of how short it could be. He often tells his grandmother that he doesn't want to waste a minute, said Barnett.

"He says, 'Mom [he calls Barnett 'Mom'], I don't have much time. I've gotta do as I've gotta do,'" she said. "He's a happy child usually."

In 1995, Billy decided he wanted to walk for the March of Dimes. So he did. He walked nearly five miles with a van driving along behind him to pick him up whenever he got tired. He was named a "Special Ambassador" for the March of Dimes that year.

When another little girl at Billy's church was injured in a household accident, Billy decided to go to the

hospital and visit her. She was in a coma when Billy walked in the room, said Barnett. He told her parents that she was going to be okay because God was going to take care of her. Right after he left, the girl opened her eyes.

"These kids [with Ellis Van Creveld syndrome] are special kids. God put them here for a reason, and we're not to question it," she said. "If they're given a chance, they can do just as well as a regular kid. They never

give up."

Over the years, Billy has received a lot of correspondence from his well-wishers. In fact, the Christmas tree at his house is covered with ornaments that people have given to him. One of the most exciting pieces of mail Billy has received recently is a letter from Santa Claus.

Christmas cards can be sent to Billy in care of Mr. and Mrs. Butch Barnett, 512 Bentley Road, Shelby, NC 28152.



Billy Bridges, who has Ellis Van Creveld syndrome, recently endured his latest trial—knee surgery. He sits in front of the Christmas tree at his house, which is covered with decorations his well-wishers have sent him over the years.



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Kings Mountain Weather Report

(Compiled by Kenneth Kitzmiller)

December 18-22	Last year
Total precipitation .86	0
Maximum 1 day .86 (19th)	0
Month to date 3.99	2.63
Year to date 45.17	38.67
Low temperature 35 (22nd)	28 (20th)
High temperature 61 (22nd)	63 (18th)
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