

TRUE STORIES



It Took a Village

Doctors told Tina Corbin her little boy would never walk. The people of Cullman, Alabama, knew otherwise *by Shari Cohen*

From the waitresses at Jack's restaurant who bring him extra desserts, to the pharmacist at the local Wal-Mart who comes out from behind the counter to give him a hug, to the clerk at Jerry's supermarket who lets him ride on the conveyor belt, the small town of Cullman, Alabama, is smitten with 10-year-old Dakota Jones.

"He seems to simply enjoy life, and people tell me his personality is contagious," says his mother, Tina Corbin. "His innocence just rubs off on people."

But she says there's another reason the people of Cullman are drawn to her son. "Dakota has the courage of someone who has

served in a war, and he has fought just as many battles," says Tina, a special-education teacher's aide.

At the age of 3—shortly before his family moved to this rural town halfway between Birmingham and Huntsville—Dakota was diagnosed with an extremely rare genetic disease called ATRX syndrome (or Alpha-Thalassemia), which causes serious physical and learning disabilities. In Dakota's case, the syndrome also brought on cerebral palsy and seizures. He's one of

Tina Corbin with Jasmine, Dakota and Jerica Jones, surrounded by, clockwise from lower left: Lynn Bradford, Bobbie Burden, assistant principal Charles Clemons and Sharon Kane; Justin Allred; cowboys Dwight Bibb, David Stallings and Jack Stidham; pharmacist Tracy Johnson; waitresses Hazel Thompson and Diane Knight.

about 100 people in the world known to have the condition.

"Don't expect too much," doctors told Tina at the time her son was diagnosed. "Dakota will never walk or do anything by himself." These words stung.

To make matters worse, Tina was rearing Dakota and his two older sisters, Jasmine, then 7, and Jerica, then 5, all alone. She and her husband,

Chris, divorced when Dakota was 2—their already fragile marriage

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crumbled under the stress of caring for a sick child.

Tina expected to become father, mother and teacher to her son, guiding him to adulthood and helping him to make the most of his abilities. But she was mistaken. She soon learned that she wasn't alone on her journey to help Dakota.

One day, after Tina and the children first moved to Cullman, she was out in her yard and noticed the smiles and waves as cars passed. Before long, those simple greetings gave way to outstretched arms, hugs and offers of personal time and determination.

As word spread quickly through the Cullman community that Tina's little boy was in the hospital with pneumonia, people gradually came forward to offer support. New friends and neighbors came to the hospital bringing baskets filled with baked goods and magazines for the young mother. Some offered to stay in Dakota's room for a half-hour so Tina could get out for some fresh air.

Then, Dakota started attending classes at the Cullman County Child Development Center, and the outpouring of care continued. He had vision problems and suffered from reflux, a digestive disorder. Medication kept him seizure-free, but he was dependent on his wheelchair to get around. Tina was hopeful when his teacher, Sharon Kane, said, "I think we can get Dakota out of his wheelchair and walking."

Sharon, along with physical therapist Pat Peinhardt and adaptive physical education teacher Lynn Bradford, began to work with Dakota. First, they placed

him in a "standing frame," supported by straps, to get him accustomed to putting weight on his legs. A year later, he graduated to a "stander"—a square box about 3 or 4 feet tall, where he would stand with his elbows leaning on an activity table. This exercise, while painful and tiring to Dakota, allowed his leg muscles to grow even stronger. The team began by having him stand for five minutes, and then gradually worked up to longer periods.

"I would put the box in front of the window, because when he stood there, staring outside, he wouldn't become frustrated," says Sharon.

"It was hard to see him resisting so much, and I hated to see him cry, but as the weeks passed, I noticed that he was able to stand for longer periods of time," says Tina. She watched as her son progressed to a walker and then a walker belt attached to his waist.

Bobbie Burden and other teacher's aides and volunteers at the school joined in to help. They connected a

loop to Dakota's walker belt and held on to it as he took step after step around the gym. The belt provided support when he needed it or when he let go.

"At times, I wondered if we were pushing him too hard," says Bobbie, "but we needed to be firm with him to see results."

Soon, Bobbie was also pitching in at Tina's home. She would hold Dakota on her lap, helping him eat his breakfast. She spoke with him and walked with him, hugging him when he needed comfort.

"Bobbie has done everything for Dakota," says Tina, "from

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"Things do get better when you're surrounded by positive people who have enough faith for you even when you're too tired to have any more yourself," says Tina.

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going home with half his breakfast in her hair after feeding him, to crying with him when he was feeling sick. And when I call Bobbie, she'll say, 'Don't worry today, Tina. I'll worry enough for both of us.'"

Each day, it seemed, the circle would widen in the joint quest to help get Tina's little boy on his feet.

"Sharon Kane invited me to bring Dakota to her home at the lake for a swim," says Tina. "She said, 'It would be great therapy for him and I know he would love it.'"

Tina's home was also filled with visitors, young and old, who stopped by to see Dakota. Jasmine and Jerica's friends would come to play, and take Dakota outside to bounce with them on the trampoline. Tina's friend Vickie Lancaster took him to the roller skating rink. Surrounded by bright lights and music, the younger children would fight over who would help push a giggling Dakota, holding on tight in his wheelchair, across the floor.

It was Vickie who took the girls to school so Tina could stay with Dakota when he was not feeling well. And Brendan Kisbey-Green, a high school senior, walked with Dakota, coaxing and cheering as he took faltering steps around the house. "He'd say, 'Come on, Dakota. Let's see you walk!'" says Tina.

As the days and weeks passed, Dakota's leg muscles seemed to be getting stronger. One evening, Tina arrived at her sister Sherry's house to pick up her son. From a distance she saw Sherry walking down the hallway with a little boy.

"I thought, 'Who is she taking care of? She has my three kids and three of her own. Doesn't she have enough children to watch?' Then I got closer, and I saw it was Dakota—walking on his own. There are no words to express how I felt at that moment. I just burst into tears."

At each stage of progress, the citizens of Cullman are still right there with Dakota. There are the cowboy rodeo-ropers who put Dakota and other disabled children on their horses and let them ride. "The kids have a wonderful time, and it's such great therapy, considering all of the muscles you have to use when you ride," says Tina.

Then there are the young adult volunteers like Justin Allred, who planned an end-of-summer pool party for Dakota and his friends. "You should have seen the smile on my son's face when Justin took him on the big water slide."

Tina says she knows there are still new challenges to meet. Teaching her son to communicate is one of them. Doctors have their doubts that Dakota will talk, but Tina has lived with doubt before. She dreams of one day hearing her son ask for a glass of water or utter the words "I love you, Mom."

There is no way of knowing whether Tina's dream will come true, but she knows she won't have to travel far to find out. "The people of Cullman have rallied in each of our triumphs and shared in our sorrows. If it will happen, it will happen here."

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