

## March of Dimes ambassador family knows details of premature birth

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**By TODD GLASSCOCK**

For Dr. Michelle Manning, everyday details matter. In her practice as an obstetrician-gynecologist at the Waco Center for Women's Health, catching the right detail may help a patient with her health.

As a mother, spotting ordinary details of growth in her 2-year-old son Jonathan is a delight, as most parents would attest when they see their children grow. One evening while watching her husband Jeff, an anesthesiologist at Providence Health Center, and their son play in the living room, she noted how big their son had become, an everyday detail, but one that seemed a little more special to the Mannings.

Two years earlier, when Jonathan was just a few weeks old, his father's thumbnail covered the boy's hand, and a wedding ring fit over his arm, almost to the shoulder. Jonathan was among the rising percentage of children born preterm or with a low birth weight. According to national figures from the March of Dimes, the preterm birth rate, based on the number of the children born before 37 weeks' gestation, is 12.5 percent. Because of their son, the Mannings have become involved with the March of Dimes, the organization dedicated to funding research to help prevent premature births, birth defects and infant mortality. Last year they participated in WalkAmerica, a fundraising effort for the organization, and this year they are serving as the March of Dimes Ambassador family. This year's WalkAmerica is April 28 at Bledsoe-Miller Park.

"I got to hold him when he was 2 weeks old for the first time," Michelle Manning said. "At that time he was connected to a breathing machine, and wrapped in warm blankets because he couldn't sustain his body temperature. He was still right at about a pound and 12 ounces. He certainly wasn't anywhere near 2 pounds. And when they put him on my chest, you couldn't even tell that you were holding anything, he was so light."

As doctors, both parents understood the risks for preterm babies, maybe a little more than anyone should. They knew preterm babies could develop overwhelming infections, or become blind, or experience bleeding in the brain.

"We knew what to worry about," Michelle said.

"A little knowledge is a scary thing," added Jeff, who had taken care of small, sick children in the operating room.

Worry, of course, sometimes walks hand-in-hand with parenting, even before parents have their children. The Mannings knew there were some risks involved if they were to become parents, because Michelle had a uterine malformation that made it more likely

she would deliver preterm. “Being an OB,” Michelle said, “I knew 60 percent of those people (at risk) do fine.”

Even so, they decided it was time to start a family. At the time, they were finishing up their residencies at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. With Michelle’s condition, they took precautions and believed Michelle would carry to full term.

At 25 weeks into the pregnancy, Michelle came to Waco to visit her ailing grandmother, who died during the visit. She would stay in town for the funeral. One night during her stay, she said she had “a feeling something was not quite right. I went to Providence and was told I was 3 centimeters dilated, and was probably going to deliver the baby within 48 hours. Being an OB, I knew that was not good.”

Doctors at Providence transferred her to Hillcrest, because Hillcrest had a neonatal intensive care unit, she said. Thirty-six hours later, Jonathan was delivered after Michelle had carried him for just 26 weeks and one day.

Immediately after delivery, he was taken to the nursery, and because a preterm child’s lungs at that stage haven’t fully developed, breathing tubes were inserted. Parents and child were separated.

Michelle soon received word that Jonathan would have a 60 percent chance of survival, but there was a 50 percent chance the baby would suffer a severe complication. While under care, Jonathan underwent retinal surgery on both eyes to prevent blindness, she said. Eventually, he will need glasses.

At one point he also became very anemic, and doctors had to perform what was essentially CPR, she said.

Jonathan spent a month at Hillcrest before the hospital at Birmingham sent a jet to pick him up. He stayed there while the Mannings completed their medical training. Each day Jonathan was in the hospital was a “pins and needles” day for the Mannings.

“Even when we were having good days, and everything was fine, we were waiting for what was going to develop the next week,” she said.

Sometimes it was a lonely wait, with worry that tested their faith. “We really felt that God was watching over Jonathan, but, at the same time, as physicians we knew what all the possibilities were,” Michelle said.

“It tested our faith and made us stronger as a family,” Jeff added. “It was a long three months, but God took care of us.”

Knowing the possibilities made it difficult for the Mannings. As physicians, they are trained to step back and try to stay somewhat emotionally distant. While they wanted to

show their love to Jonathan, at the same time, they tried to distance themselves. But they also had to allow themselves to be worried parents.

“One of the nurses looked at me after a little while, and said, ‘You can stop being a doctor now. You’re his mom,’ ” Michelle said. “And that was it. I just started crying, because it was true: I was trying to hold myself back like you do with very sick patients, so that it doesn’t hurt so bad if you lose them. And when it’s your own child, that’s a very difficult place to be.”

As the time for discharge neared, the parents would have more firsts to experience. One first came when the breathing tubes were taken out and Michelle heard her baby cry for the first time.

“I didn’t hear him cry in the delivery room,” she said, “and so the day that they extubated him, and took the tube out, and I got to hear him cry for the first time was miraculous, because I wasn’t sure I was going to get to hear that.”

Jonathan was at the hospital in Birmingham for two months, before being discharged — a week before he would have been due at full term.

At birth, Jonathan weighed 1 pound, 12 ounces. When he was discharged, he was still small at 4 pounds, 6 ounces.

“We had to put a couple of little rolls in the car seat to keep him from knocking around,” Michelle said.

Once he was discharged, the long, lonely, troubling wait was over. The Mannings had their son. He was their miracle.

Mom, Dad and son returned to Waco after the Mannings finished their residencies. Michelle’s mother watches after Jonathan during the day. Doctors recommend preterm children not go to daycare, to avoid health problems. Some will need in-home therapy, as well.

“As an obstetrician we don’t understand what causes preterm birth,” Michelle said, when talking about her interest in the March of Dimes. “We don’t have any effective means to treat it at this time, so any research that can be done, both to help the prevention of preterm birth, as well as helping these preemies, is near and dear to my heart.”

She would love to make sure other parents are spared what she and her husband went through, which puts the March of Dimes close to her heart.

When Jonathan, or J.T., as he prefers, comes into the Mannings’ living room to greet a guest, it’s hard to imagine the preemie so small his mother couldn’t feel him on her chest the first time she held him. Wispy blond hair, about knee-high, he’s just up from a nap,

and carries a favorite stuffed animal, a blue dog. It doesn't take him long to get his bearings, and he names off some of his favorite things.

He loves cars, and makes a sputtering noise like an engine. "Keys" was one of his first words, and he has his own keys to play with, but what he would really like to do is drive his dad's car. He looks at his dad and expresses this wish.

It'll be a long time before he gets to drive a car, but learning, like growing, is all in the details.

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#### MARCH OF DIMES WALKAMERICA

WHEN: April 28; registration at 8 a.m., walk at 9 a.m.

WHERE: Bledsoe-Miller Park

REGISTRATION INFO: Signing up on the day of the walk costs \$10. Most walkers will be members of teams raising money; donations can be raised online. Sign up online at [www.walkamerica.org](http://www.walkamerica.org), click on "register online." Walkers and teams are encouraged.

CONTACT: 741-1025 at the March of Dimes office for more information.