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'SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT HERE' BABY'S PARENTS' STRENGTH FORGED BY TOUGH LIVES

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Laura Campo was 15 -- the oldest of four kids -- when her father left for the hospital from the home he built with his own hands in Rhode Island, and never came back.

A machinist by trade, he was the master of a close-knit family that lived hand-to-mouth on an island in Narragansett Bay. His wife, Susan, drove across the two-mile bridge to Newport every day to clean up after retarded kids in a home so she could bring in a little extra money.

When her husband died of hardened arteries, she was devastated.

"Laura took over the job of father and mother," her younger sister, Robin Bertrand, 26, said. "She held the family together for all of us while my mother struggled to bring in enough money. Laura cleaned for us. Laura cooked for us. I remember we ate a lot of corn because Laura liked corn."

If life has prepared Laura Campo for anything, it has readied her for struggle. The death of her father when she was just a girl. Pregnancy at 17 and a short-lived marriage. Obesity that crippled her self-esteem until she had her stomach stapled at 21 and shed 130 pounds.

Five weeks ago, fate dealt the cruelest blow of all.

"What do you mean my baby has no brain?" the 30-year-old waitress blurted at her doctor as he explained the results of an ultrasound test. "What in the hell do you mean!"

Then, in a flash, she made the connection.

She recalled a technician's strange reaction the week before as he bounced sound waves off the tiny fetus nestled in her belly. It was a Thursday in February, in the 30th week of her pregnancy.

Campo had been watching the television screen above her bed at the Broward Family Health Clinic in Fort Lauderdale, where she had been receiving basic prenatal care in a program for poor mothers.

This day, she had gone out of curiosity. She wanted to know her baby's sex.

"The guy who was doing the test was running his finger across the screen during the ultrasound and he's saying 'There's the liver, and there's the heart and that's the stomach and here's the hands and feet.'

"Then he shows me the spine, and it's scrolling up the screen -- scrolling and scrolling -- all the way up to the neck. But there was never any head. I never saw a head."

The technician was puzzled.

"There seems to be some abnormality," he told her. "It could be the machine." He told her to come back in a week.

The following Thursday, she drove her worn blue station wagon one more time from her apartment in Coral Springs to the clinic.

Again she bared her belly for the tests. Again the results were the same. Again the technician refused to explain. Only a doctor was qualified to decipher the results, he told her.

Now she was worried, despite the reassurance she took from the baby kicking inside her. She drove home wanting nothing more than to be with her children Ashley, 3, and Justin, 4, and to talk over the day's events with their father, Justin Pearson, 30. The couple had met eight years earlier at a Fort Lauderdale nightclub. They had both come to Florida looking for a better life.

Campo had just gotten divorced and wanted to escape the cold winters and bad memories. Her mother had moved to Florida and Campo hoped to find a fresh start there.

Pearson, too, was fleeing tragedy.

The youngest of seven children, he grew up in a two-bedroom cabin with no running water outside Carlisle, Ohio, never knowing his father. He died in a steel-mill accident when Justin was a few months old.

"His lungs got blistered and collapsed," Pearson said. "I was too young to ever know him. That's one reason it's important to me to be a good parent. My mother did a wonderful job raising us up and I know what it's like to not have a father."

When the other kids in the family moved away, it was Justin who tended the chicken coop, looked after the family plot and cared for his mother into her old age.

"I was holding her hand when the paramedics came to revive her," he said. "I was still holding her hand when they wheeled her out the door. That was it for me. When she died, I really had no reason for staying. The factories were all closing. There weren't any jobs."

A few weeks later, he met Campo and they moved in together to stretch the money from their low-paying jobs.

Then, as now, Campo worked as a waitress at the Feed Bag restaurant in Coral Springs and Pearson held down a spot on a cement crew for Area Paving.

"They love each other like few other people I know," said Ginnie Abraham, 47, a co-worker of Laura's. "It's been that way for as long as I've known her, which is about four years now. He is her strength and she is his. They take care of each other."

Campo said the couple have talked about getting married over the years -- especially after they had their two children. They were making plans to get married before the new baby came.

Before the ultrasound test.

"Before all the trouble started," Campo said.

On the Monday after her second test turned up bad, she went to see the doctor.

"Something's not right here," she recalled him saying as he looked over her test results.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "What's the matter with the baby?"

"It's the head," he said. "The top of the head."

"What do you mean?" she gasped, her panic mounting.

"I'm not sure," the doctor said. "We'll take another test tomorrow just to be sure."

The next day, Campo began vomiting uncontrollably. Pearson rushed home from work and drove her to Coral Springs Medical Center, where she was put on intravenous fluids for dehydration and lined up for yet another ultrasound test.

By now everyone was talking about the baby's head. The circumference of the head. The depressions in the head. The size of the head. On Wednesday, she finally got the truth.

"My baby had no brain and no skull," Campo said. "No nothing."

Doctors told her it was too late for an abortion or artificially induced labor. She had no choice but to give birth.

She called Ginnie Abraham at work, sobbing. Gradually the conversation turned. As they talked, Campo recalled a television special she had seen about babies with no brains.

The show described how a small number of such babies managed to live for a few hours after they were born, and went on to say that if they survive long enough their organs can be taken out and put into sick babies.

"It was like a breath of fresh air had gone through her body," Abraham said. "She changed completely. It gave her strength I have never seen before in a person."

That night, at home, Laura and Justin closed themselves in their room as their children slept and decided to take on the fight of their lives -- lives that had prepared them for nothing but a fight to the end.

"We never thought about the law," Pearson said Friday. "All we thought about was what was right. We found out about the law later."

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