

# Orangeburg child's miraculous progress highlights importance of having high-quality care close to home

On Friday, May 20, 2011, Wendy Johnson and her husband, Chris, a worship pastor, had just moved into a new home in Orangeburg. They had celebrated the finalization of their daughter, Naomi's adoption earlier that week. The new home's backyard pool was in disrepair and the Johnsons looked forward to fixing the pool and swimming together.

Wendy Johnson had just checked on Naomi, who was playing outside with Wendy's two grandsons when the boys ran inside. The oldest shouted, "Baby's in the pool!"

Although the pool was surrounded by two fences, the boys had managed to open one of the gates. Wendy saw that Naomi was floating face down in about two feet of rainwater that had collected in the pool. The Johnsons' then 14-year-old daughter, Rachel, grabbed Naomi out of the water and she and Wendy began cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and called 911.

The ambulance arrived quickly and paramedics administered CPR and transported her to the nearest hospital. "We were frantic. I begged them to call Richland. Palmetto Health Children's Hospital sent the helicopter and a children's ambulance," said Wendy. Pediatric intensivist Robert Hubbird, MD, directed care by phone from Palmetto Health Children's Hospital and gave orders to keep Naomi as cool as possible.

Respiratory therapist Jill Peake, RT, and pediatric nurse Lori Nuelken, RN, of the pediatric transport team worked quickly to keep Naomi cool by filling gloves with cold water and placing them around her head and shoulders. "It was agonizing for us to see a child in Naomi's condition because we both were mothers of children her age," said Peake.

Naomi was rushed to Palmetto Health Children's Hospital and taken immediately to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU). Hubbird explained that an induced coma was necessary and that medications could help reduce swelling in her brain. Tests indicated Naomi had suffered severe global brain damage. "Dr. Hubbird told us that the first 24 hours were the most critical and that if Naomi survived, we could go from there," said Wendy.

"When EMS initially arrived at the home, Naomi was in complete cardiopulmonary arrest, which meant she was getting no oxygen or glucose to her brain," said Hubbird. "We were trying to preserve what was intact and we used ventilation and medication to stabilize her."

Sunday morning, May 22, Hubbird met with the Johnsons in the PICU conference room. "We asked if all the pastors from our church could also be in the room. I asked Dr. Hubbird how many children in Naomi's condition he had seen who survived. Dr. Hubbird said he had been a critical care physician for nearly 30 years and that he had not seen one child in this condition survive," said Wendy. "I told him he was about to see his first."

Naomi remained in the induced coma for 11 days. Her condition was still critical and it was not clear whether Naomi would wake up. The Johnsons made sure one of them was always at Naomi's bedside. One day, Chris was holding Naomi's hand and he felt her squeeze his finger. Chris and Wendy were thankful for any sign – however small – that Naomi knew she was not alone.

When she came out of the coma, Naomi was like an infant. She was able to say, "Mama," but otherwise was unable to speak or sit up. She remained hospitalized for about a month and Hubbird explained that the inpatient rehabilitation unit at Levine Children's Hospital in Charlotte was the best option for helping Naomi progress.

"Dr. Colleen A. Wunderlich was her doctor there," said Wendy. Naomi received intensive interdisciplinary therapy at the inpatient rehabilitation unit. There, she became more responsive, and began her recovery from her severe anoxic brain injury. Naomi made gains in head control, sitting balance and supported walking. She responded very well to the therapies and especially the therapy dog. Although she made more gains than other children after a near drowning, she still could not sit up by herself or speak well when she left Levine's July 26 and came home to Orangeburg.

Wendy and Chris had closely watched Naomi's therapy sessions throughout her inpatient rehabilitation stay so that they could continue to help her at home, exposing her to as many old familiar experiences and new stimuli as possible. "We wanted to do everything in our power to help Naomi regain her abilities," said Wendy.



At home, Naomi still couldn't tolerate feeding, so she ended up back at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital. She was scheduled for surgery that was expected to last two hours, but ended up taking five hours. The pediatric surgeon discovered a malrotation near the colon in Naomi's intestines that had been present since birth. "No wonder Naomi couldn't eat," said Wendy. "The surgeon was meticulous and took time to repair everything to help her intestines function better. He knew what she had already been through and he explained that he didn't want her to have another obstacle, like a colostomy bag to overcome."

The Johnsons continued working with Naomi and also brought her to Palmetto Health Children's Hospital for outpatient physical, occupational and speech therapy. Naomi continued to make gains and was eventually able to walk on her own, speak in full sentences clearly and now even loves to dance!

Today, Naomi is a rising 5th grader. "She still has challenges because of the brain injury. She has some learning challenges and some physical challenges, but she is our miracle and we are grateful every day for how far she has come," said Wendy. "All of the doctors that see her, however, are amazed at her rehabilitation and progress from the non-fatal drowning, as the majority of kids that experience what Naomi went through do not recover as fully as she has," she added.

"Naomi's recovery is remarkable," said Hubbird, who recently had the opportunity to reunite with Naomi and her father. The Johnsons also are grateful that renovations are underway to construct South Carolina's first pediatric rehabilitation program at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital. You can help make it a reality for children in need. Your gift will help fund specialized equipment for this new 13-bed unit, which will allow children and adolescents recovering from accidents and life-altering conditions to be treated locally.

"Soon, children in the Midlands with intensive rehabilitation needs, like Naomi, can stay close to home when they need these services," said Colleen A. Wunderlich, MD, MSc, who will direct the new Sandra and Leon Levine Pediatric Inpatient Rehabilitation Center at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital. "This will help South Carolina children and adolescents recover and maximize function after traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, stroke, brain and spine infections and tumors, other neurological conditions, multi-trauma, and other life-altering conditions that require intensive rehabilitation – in their home state," she added.

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**Palmetto Health Foundation has launched a campaign to raise funds for the Sandra and Leon Levine Pediatric Inpatient Rehabilitation Center at Palmetto Health Children's Hospital, with a goal of \$800,000. To pledge your gift, contact Diane Junis at 803-434-2832 or [Diane.Junis@PalmettoHealth.org](mailto:Diane.Junis@PalmettoHealth.org). Palmetto Health team members may make a gift through payroll deduction.**