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Twins remembered with golf event

By Jennifer Schmidt

Leader-Telegram staff

Mark and Kate Steward's prayers were answered and revoked the same January day they experienced the miracle of birth and the devastation of death.

Daughter Grace died in Mark's arms 45 minutes after her Jan. 25 birth, and Grace's twin sister, McKenna, passed away early the following day on Kate's chest.

"It was the happiest day of our lives and the scariest day of our lives," said 26-year-old Kate, an Eau Claire teacher.

The Cadott couple's experiences — and desire to comfort other parents in similar situations — motivated them to organize a weekend benefit in memory of their daughters. All proceeds from Saturday's "Golf for the Girls" event at Pine Meadow Golf Course will be donated to two key medical centers where the family sought care.

"We felt we needed to do something to honor our daughters," said Mark, 34, the zoning administrator for Rusk County.

He and his wife always wanted a family. Kate wanted four children, so the couple was ecstatic when they learned they were pregnant with twins.

But their joy turned to fear when a checkup the fourth month of Kate's pregnancy revealed that Grace had an untreatable birth defect called anencephaly. Her prognosis was poor; if she wasn't stillborn, Grace was expected to die within a few hours or days after birth.

A crushing blow in itself, the Cadott couple was handed more bad news two weeks later when their identical twins were diagnosed with Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome, a disease of the placenta affecting more than 8,500 infants each year.

The condition occurs when abnormal blood vessels connecting the twins in the placenta let blood pass disproportionately between them. In the Stewards' case, McKenna was donating so much blood to Grace that she didn't have enough for herself.

Kate underwent fetoscopic placental laser surgery in mid-December in Milwaukee to stop the harmful transfusion. Despite the surgery, which was deemed successful, McKenna still wasn't growing and the couple had exhausted their options. They delivered by caesarian section at St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield at 26 weeks. Both girls weighed 1 pound and were about 12 inches long.

Mark and Kate were with Grace her entire existence, brief as it was. They felt blessed to have hours rather than minutes with McKenna, who was taken to the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit. Kate remembers singing songs to McKenna and feeling encouraged when numbers on her monitoring equipment rose after touching or talking to her.

Proceeds from Saturday's golf benefit will be donated to the International Institute for the Treatment of Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome in Milwaukee and St. Joseph's Hospital in Marshfield. Their intent is to support TTTS research via the Milwaukee facility and enhance a Parent Resource Center in Marshfield.

Dr. Julian E. De Lia, who performed the laser surgery on Kate and is medical director of the institution receiving partial proceeds, said for the Stewards to rise up from their grief in this manner is extraordinary.

"I admire their efforts to make a difference for other people," said De Lia, who plans to be at the benefit.

The Stewards intend to make the benefit an annual event, with proceeds continually supporting the two efforts.

"I think that kind of commitment is just incredible, considering their situation," said Ann Boson, manager of the Foundation of St. Joseph's Hospital. "They're very special people."

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