

ZEKE'S GIFT | Out of faith and sorrow come strength and peace

'Hi. This is mommy'



Ezekiel Samuel Weatherford arrived at 5:23 a.m. on March 6. The abnormalities that he was born with — the result of a non-hereditary birth defect — meant his time with his family was short, little more than half an hour. But it was long enough for him to be loved and cuddled. "God honored my prayer," his mother, Jessica, said.

STORY BY LEE HILL KAVANAUGH ★ PHOTOS BY ALLISON LONG
THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Jessica Weatherford prayed that Zeke wouldn't arrive on Valentine's Day.

Once that passed, she prayed he wouldn't be born on her fifth wedding anniversary, March 9, less than a week away. She didn't want their anniversary to remind her and Dave forever of the baby they lost.

By 37 weeks, she's really feeling the pregnancy. For nights, she has tossed and turned. She's bloated, she always has to go to the bathroom, her legs are swollen.

At 1:30 a.m. March 6, a week before her C-section is scheduled, contractions begin. At 4:10 a.m., Jessica is admitted into Room 3607 at Overland Park Regional Medical Center. Patti Lewis of Alexandra's House, a perinatal hospice, is already there.

Baby Zeke is coming.
Dave disappears from the

room, a cell phone glued to his ear, reaching family from Jessica's call list. He marvels at their good luck that Tori had spent the night with his parents at their home west of Lawrence. They didn't have to wake a toddler, grab her diaper bag, toys and snacks, and get her dressed.

A wave of pain makes Jessica's legs and body quiver. Her face contorts before the pain passes.

Nurses and doctors enter, monitor electronic beeps and

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SECOND OF TWO PARTS

After learning that their child will die within minutes after his birth because of a devastating genetic disorder, Jessica and Dave Weatherford decide to celebrate every moment of his life. They draw strength from family and friends and supporters such as Patti Lewis of Alexandra's House. As Zeke's day approaches, fear grows, but so does love.

FROM A1

blips, ask about her previous experiences with anesthesia, about her dental work, about the last time she ate.

The sound of a thumping heart fills the room, 132 beats a minute: Zeke. Just a quick check to see how he is doing.

Physician R. Tony Moulton enters, already wearing blue scrubs and shoe covers.

"Hello! Four a.m. in the morning! All right!" he says in a booming voice, clapping his hands.

"It won't be long now, Jessica."

Moulton has been kind and supportive. A look of relief settles on Jessica's face.

Outside the room, her parents, Lori and Rick Singleton, arrive. Rick's eyes are already red-rimmed. He stands tall in his knife-creased jeans and pointy-toed boots, wearing a black cowboy hat and gray handlebar mustache.

He holds Lori's hand almost non-stop. She wears a fringed leather jacket and turquoise earrings. They met while vacationing in Montana years ago and have raised eight children, along with caring for 30 foster children.

Together they've been Jessica's role models, a couple who live what they believe.

They cry, until it is time to greet their daughter.

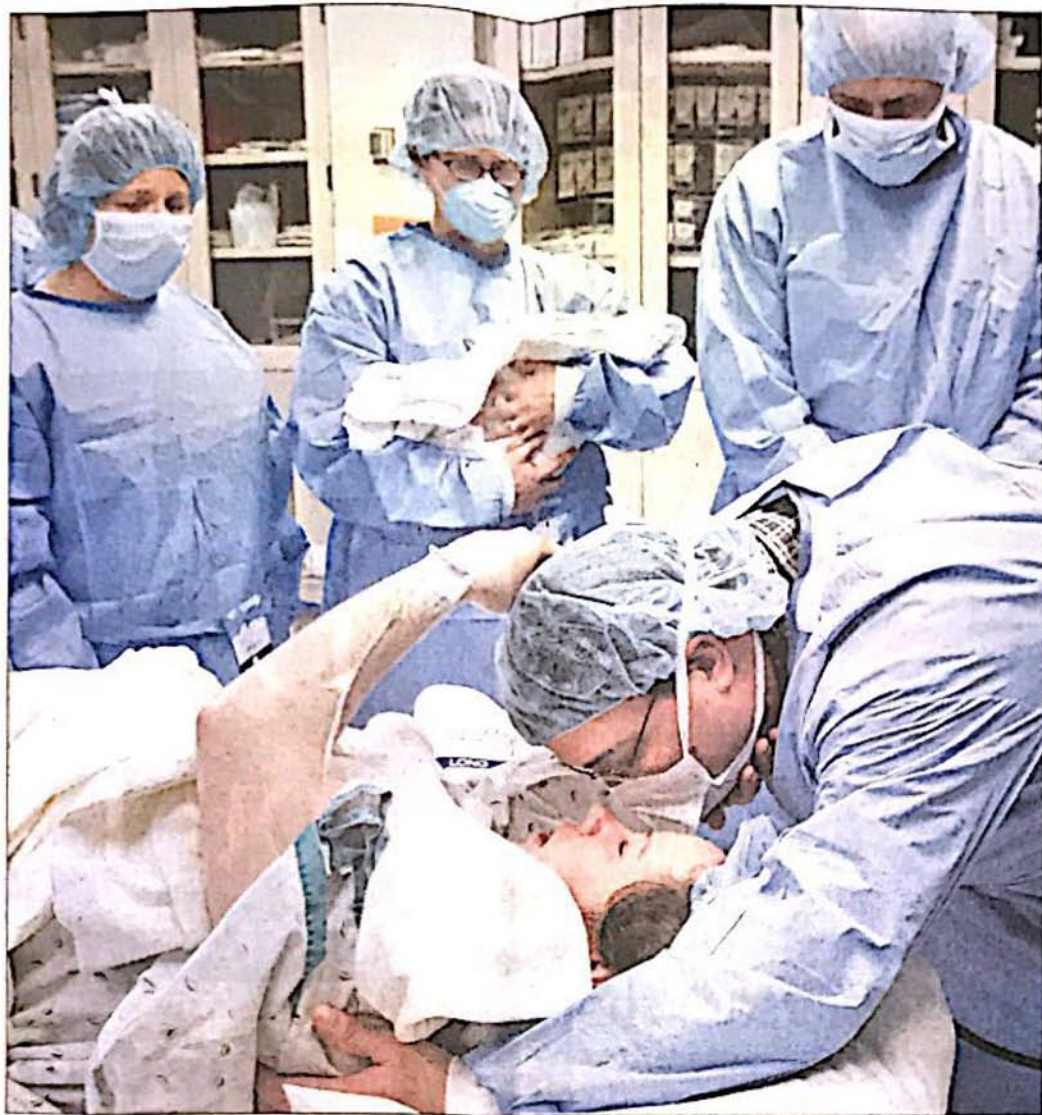
"You're pretty distinctive," Jessica says to her dad as he enters her room. She giggles. "Everybody was asking about the guy in the cowboy hat."

She seems so young to Rick. It wasn't so long ago when he was in a different hospital, holding his wife's hand, waiting for his twin girls to be born.

Jessica's legs quiver from the pain. After kissing his daughter's forehead, Rick presses his hands lightly on her legs, trying to calm them. Lori holds her daughter's hand.

Dave enters the room once more, pacing back and forth. Still, he looks calm. He watches his wife closely. He asks whom else he should call, whether she needs her purse, her Bible or her notebook. He knows how Jessica likes to plan.

Her notebook! Still in the car. Dave tells her he'll retrieve it.



PHOTOS BY ALLISON LONG | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Jessica and Dave Weatherford clung to each other in an operating room at Overland Park Regional Medical Center after their son, Zeke, was pronounced dead. Joining them to grieve were (left to right) Kathy Weatherford, Dave's mother; Jacquelyn Thompson, Jessica's twin sister; and Rick Singleton, Jessica's father. Each family member took a turn at holding Zeke.

The family dog, Emma, needs to be let out, she reminds him. They left so fast, they forgot to put the beagle outside. Maybe a neighbor? Dave disappears to make another call.

A nurse enters the room with a stack of blue shoe covers, hair nets, face masks and big blue hospital gowns. The operating room staff has read Jessica and Dave's birth plan. They are prepared for grandparents, a few aunts, Patti Lewis, a minister and a few friends.

Nurses wheel Jessica into the operating room. Dave and the entourage wait outside while Jessica gets an epidural. He gathers everyone to pray.

"Lord, this is your baby. ... We just pray that you give Jessica a strength and peace, day by day. That we'll have time with Zeke. ... Amen."

With a whoosh, the operating room doors open and a nurse waves everyone in.

Zeke's day

1 Corinthians 1:27: "For God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

Zeke's legs are moving as the doctor pulls him from Jessica. His umbilical cord is cut and he's passed to a nurse with waiting arms. She carries him to a warming table.

A digital clock in the operating room reads 5:23 a.m.

Zeke doesn't cry. A nurse wipes a yellowish substance from his skin and slides a soft knit hat over his elongated head. His mouth, with a double cleft lip on either side, slowly opens and closes. He has no nose.

A clear ball outside his abdomen — the omphalocele — holds some of his intestines, stomach and liver.

"Oh, the omphalocele isn't as big as we thought it'd be," Dave says over his shoulder so Jessica can hear. "And it didn't rupture. It didn't."

Another doctor quickly checks his vitals. She lifts one of his eyelids and stops.

"There's no eye tissue there," she says. "I'm sorry."

She places a stethoscope over his heart. The Weatherfords asked not to have any heart monitoring. Hearing Zeke ebb away would be too difficult.

But the doctor hears a solid thump-thump. Zeke's bluish skin begins to pink. A team of hands gently wrap his omphalocele, hiding it with a pastel baby blanket.

Dave places Zeke in Jessica's arms.

"Hi," she whispers. "This is Mommy. I love you."

With a finger she strokes his cheek. She's prayed that her son would be beautiful to her, no matter what deformities he had. She'd feared meeting him as much as she had prayed that she would be able to.

In this moment she sees only a tiny baby, fragile and pure, with a mop of curly hair. A tiny baby who kicked and turned and danced inside her. A baby who already has touched so many lives.

His cheeks are chubby. His feet are chubby, too. A tiny hand with six fingers curls around one of hers.

Tiny details that bring her joy.

"Look at those cheeks," she says.

She smiles at his round, ruddy face. He's not the preemie they were expecting. He's a full-size baby boy.

She kisses him.

"Ohhhh," she coos, as if her lips have brushed against the smoothest silk.

Each time she speaks to Zeke, he moves his head just a little, jostles his tiny hand just a little.



Patti Lewis of Alexandra's House had told the Weatherfords that it was OK for families to hold a dead baby. She told them it was OK to bathe and kiss and baptize the baby, take photos and dress the baby, even to make plaster casts of little hands and feet.

She isn't aware that her doctor is drawing ~~the~~ ^{just a little} ~~the~~ ^{the} wound they'd opened. Yards of bloody gauze are lifted away. A nurse writing on a memo board keeps track of how many sponges and swabs and medical tools were inserted and removed.

Two, then three, then four more masked faces enter the room. They crowd around the bed: Jessica's twin sister, Jacquelyn; her father, Rick, who had opted out but changed his mind; her mother-in-law, Kathy Weatherford; her minister from Olathe Bible Church, Rex Bonar.

Aunts. Grandparents. Friends. They hug each other, reach out to pat her.

The doctors complete their sewing. Someone turns off the machine monitoring Jessica's heart. The

room is quiet now except for the buzz of the fluorescent lights.

"Do you want some skin-to-skin contact, Jess?" asks Dave.

She nods. One tear rolls down her cheek, then another.

Dave and a nurse pull sheets down so Zeke is lying on Jessica's sternum. She smiles at feeling his little body.

She's dreamed of this moment from the day she learned she was pregnant. She dreamed and prayed that she'd have time with her little boy before his life passed.

But too soon, she sees Zeke is leaving.

His cheek, when touched, doesn't respond with a flush of pink. It's turning sallow, then a shade of blue.

And Jessica knows.

"No, no, no," she cries. Softly first and then with a deep sob — grief, wails of pain. And every person moving or whispering or writing stops. The quiet is solemn.

Dave breaks down in his mother's arms.

To confirm what Jessica already knows, a doctor listens for life.

Nothing.

"He's done," the doctor says. The digital clock reads 5:58.

Gently, Dave takes Zeke and hands him to a doctor. She weighs and stretches a tape measure along Zeke. He weighs 6 pounds, 9½ ounces. He is 19 inches long. She carefully wraps him once more and returns him to Jessica's arms.

After a time, Dave places little Zeke in Jacquelyn's arms so he can wrap Jessica in his. Her family surrounds her, holding her hand, touching her shoulder, touching Dave's back.

Off to the side, Jacquelyn rocks little Zeke back and forth.

Jessica is wheeled into a large birthing room. Zeke is placed once more in her arms.

Mothers whose babies have died are allowed to hold them and be with them as long as they wish.

Family members gather around her bed. A prayer is offered, and then one by one, after Dave kisses his wife, everyone goes to Jessica. Her father drops to one knee at her bedside; her mother whispers in her ear.

Jacquelyn bends down, looks deep into her sister's eyes but says nothing. Her expression is enough.

Then, it's Patti Lewis' turn.

"We all have handicaps," she whispers to Jessica, as she caresses Zeke's hair. "We just keep them hidden. And he is perfect. There's nothing wrong with him." Jessica nods.

Her belief in God eases her sadness. With all her heart she believes she will see her little boy again, whole and perfect, in heaven.

"Look at her," Dave says. "She's got a peace in her. It's settled down and I can just feel it. There's a real acceptance there. I know she'll have some difficult times in the future but, you know, I can see her doing OK, and that makes me feel OK, too."

The fatigue and grief and drugs of childbirth are wearing Jessica down and her eyelids begin to flutter. But she wants to bathe Zeke's body, and dress him in the little blue outfit.

The door opens. Tori runs in and reaches for her mother.

"Hi, sweetie!" Jessica says. Tori peeks at the little baby in her arms.

"This is Baby Zeke. Would you like to see him?"

Her face is tender as she watches her daughter. Tori won't remember this day, but they will tell her.

Jessica looks around the room and smiles at her family. "If you guys would like to hold him, you can," she says. "But if you don't want to, it won't offend us. If you're not comfortable, don't worry about it."

Each person does hold Zeke, whose body is now a purplish hue, whose tiny hands have curled into fists, whose tiny ears are perfect miniatures of his father's, whose hair is dry, with spiraled curls a reddish brown.

But each sees beyond the deformed face, seeing only a cherished little boy.

"God honored my prayer," says Jessica. She smiles weakly, kisses his tiny head once more.

There will be time to plan the final details of the funeral, and even celebrate their five-year wedding anniversary.

But for now, she will cuddle and kiss and whisper to her baby how very much he is loved.

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Zeke Weatherford was buried March 12 at Pleasant Valley Cemetery in Olathe. During a singing of the hymn "It Is Well With My Soul," Zeke's mother, Jessica (right), was comforted by her mother, Lori Singleton. Jessica's belief in God helped sustain her through her pregnancy and afterward.

ABOUT THE PHOTOS

As a general policy, *The Star* does not publish photographs of people after death. Only after much deliberation did editors decide to publish photos showing baby Zeke after his death. They show the importance of the grieving ritual, which included celebrating Zeke and capturing memories that will last a lifetime. *The Star* took great care in selecting the images.

THE SERIES

Sunday: Even on the darkest of days, the Weatherfords still find joy.

Today: Zeke brings many gifts to his parents — the caring of strangers, the love of family and friends, the bolstering of their faith — but they learn the greatest gift is time with their son.