

A full-page photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, smiling and holding a young child. They are outdoors in a park-like setting with trees and a playground in the background. The woman is wearing a blue and white patterned dress, and the child is wearing a dark blue shirt and light-colored pants.

Emmett bounces back

A mysterious brain bleed, a terrifying day and a very bright future

by Lia Tremblay

Back in their home state of Minnesota, Claire and Dillon McLain were high school sweethearts. After college, when they exchanged wedding vows, they knew they wanted to be parents.

When the Army brought them to Fort Bragg, the couple settled into a home in Hope Mills. Their son, Emmett, was born in the spring of 2021 and was exactly the child his parents had dreamed of.

“He was such a happy baby,” said Claire. “He had a very relaxed personality. And he loved to eat.”

But one day that June, when Emmett was just 2 months old, things took a very unexpected turn.

“He was fine that morning,” said Claire, “but he woke up from his midday nap screaming. He refused to eat, and that just wasn’t like him.”

Concerned, Claire called their pediatrician and made an appointment for that afternoon. But when Emmett went from screaming to projectile vomiting, and one of his little legs began to tremble, she realized this was a much more urgent matter.

“I knew there was a pediatric emergency department at Cape Fear Valley,” she said. “I always had it in mind that’s where we would go if we ever had a problem.”

At the medical center, Claire and Dillon watched helplessly as the staff began ruling out potential causes of Emmett’s

distress. As the minutes ticked by, Emmett became less and less responsive.

“It was the worst experience of my life,” Claire said. “We were both in complete shock.”

Finally, a CT scan revealed the cause of Emmett’s startling decline: inside his head, an inexplicable bleeding was causing a painful and dangerous pressure to his brain.

He would need surgery as soon as possible. With little time to spare, the McLains had their first quick meeting with a man they’ll never forget: Prithvi Narayan, MD, a board-certified pediatric neurosurgeon.

“I have seen babies with this condition before,” said Dr. Narayan, “but not often. It’s unusual to see a brain bleed like this at this age without an inciting event. He had no trauma, no underlying brain blood vessel problem, nothing that would explain this.”

The surgery to stop the bleeding and relieve the pressure on Emmett’s brain took hours, followed by a two-week hospital stay to monitor his recovery.

“We were so impressed by the care we received in the pediatric intensive care unit,” Claire said. “And it was good to be close to home so we could get some rest, get a shower and get back quickly when we needed to.”

Dr. Narayan visited at least once a day to check on Emmett. On one of those visits, Emmett’s oxygen had been dropping, and he seemed out of sorts.

“One of the intensivists recommended changing how we were holding him to see if that helped,” said Claire. “But I wasn’t holding him any differently than I usually did.”

When Dr. Narayan arrived, he immediately noticed the subtle signs of an absence seizure. He had Emmett rushed into a CT scan to make sure he hadn’t developed another bleed.

“Those seizures are not easy to spot even in older children,” said Claire. “It’s common after a brain injury to have seizures, but I had no idea it was happening. I’m so glad Dr. Narayan was there.”

Dr. Narayan gives Claire credit for getting Emmett to the hospital quickly, and is glad Cape Fear Valley had the resources to help.

“Without these services in Fayetteville, the family would have to drive nearly two hours,” he said. “He needed surgery as quickly as possible. I don’t know if we would have had time to transport him.”

In the months after his release from the hospital, Emmett had a whirlwind of specialist visits to make sure all was well. His brain



Claire and Emmett with Dr. Narayan

scans showed no signs of further bleeding or swelling, and he’s had weekly occupational and physical therapy to catch up on milestones delayed by his ordeal.

“He’s made amazing progress,” said Claire. “He was walking before his first birthday.”

Claire has enjoyed sharing these milestones with Dr. Narayan as the months have passed. He says it’s one of the best things about his job.

“I love getting updates from past patients,” he said. “That’s one of the great things about pediatric patients: You get to see them grow, and you can follow their progress for life.”

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With the dark days behind them, Claire says the family is focused on making memories. Emmett spent his first Christmas in Florida and recently enjoyed his first Woodpeckers game.

“Emotionally, I think we will be healing for years,” she said. “But this experience has made us appreciate every moment with him and not worry about the small things.”

She has advice for new parents who might find themselves in a similar position.

“It’s hard to think about your baby needing anything but a checkup,” she said. “But an emergency like this can happen to you. Make sure you know where to go if it does.”