

Galen Horacek
photo by Chris Fritchie



The Gift of Life

By Angela Smith

GALEN HORACEK has long black eyelashes. They're the kind girls long for and boys are embarrassed by when they enter their preteen years. He has the exuberant smile of a child who is truly cherished.

Galen bounces around Alpha Optical in Frisco, where his father, Dr. Jeff Horacek, is an optometrist. As his son begins refilling a paper cup with Skittles, Dr. Horacek tells him to wait until after lunch. But it's useless, Dad is no match for those beautiful blue eyes and he finally relents.

"Okay, but just a few," Dr. Horacek says.

When Galen proudly shows off his new pet, a tiny gray caterpillar sharing a paper-cup home with three orange Tic Tacs, he flashes the mischievous smile of a typical five-year-old. There is no evidence that only a few months ago Galen lay in a hospital bed mere hours from death.

It began as childhood illnesses often do: he was sleeping a lot and wasn't himself. But then he began complaining that his waist hurt. When he went to the bathroom, his urine was very dark. Galen's mom, Kim Horacek, took him to the pediatrician who then referred her

to a pediatric gastroenterologist. Galen was admitted to the hospital soon after when he began vomiting blood.

"Within a couple of weeks, he went from perfectly healthy to being in the hospital," Dr. Horacek says.

The doctors at Children's Medical Center of Dallas ran numerous tests, trying to determine what was wrong with Galen. His liver wasn't functioning properly; his eyes turned yellow. The doctors monitored him for a week. He wasn't getting better.

Galen showed courage as he had his blood taken every morning, asking the nurses what the needle was made of and how much blood they needed to take. Even though he had lost his strength and ability to eat regularly, he hadn't lost his inquisitiveness.

They had him put on the transplant list that night. In just over 24 hours he had the surgery...it was a miracle, the whole process.

"He was really a lot worse than we thought," Mrs. Horacek recalls, "We kept expecting him to get better."

Then the Horaceks received devastating news: Galen had only days to live.

He was suffering from acute liver failure. If he didn't receive an emergency liver transplant soon, Galen wouldn't make it to his sixth birthday.

"They worked him up in one day and had him put on the transplant list that night. In just over 24 hours he had the surgery...it was a miracle, the whole process." Dr. Horacek says.

The donor liver came from Catherine Stocco, a one-year-old girl who had drowned in the family pool along with her three-year-old brother Marcus. Even though the parents, Matt and Vanny, were

dealing with an unfathomable loss, they decided to donate Catherine's liver in hopes of preventing another family from experiencing such pain.

"We held in our hands the opportunity to save another family from the sadness we feel, a sadness we would spare anyone if we could," the Stoccos said in a written statement.

Galen was scheduled for surgery on July 10th. The surgery was expected to take eleven hours, but the surgeon, Dr. Srinath Chinnakottla, came out after only six. He informed the Horaceks that Galen was doing great. The newly transplanted liver was a perfect match.

"They said it was the most pain-free operation they'd done," Mrs. Horacek says.

Once his life had been saved, Galen and his parents had to endure a tense recovery. Even though he'd made it through surgery, Galen had to be monitored to make sure his body wouldn't reject the new organ. And, there were other worries.

"Before the transplant, you get a build up of ammonia and you become toxic. That causes brain damage and that's usually how individuals die." Dr. Horacek explains.

Mrs. Horacek remembers the difficulty of watching her only son immobile, being fed through a tube in his nose. "I know I'm not a strong person and to go through and watch him in ICU with all those tubes and pipes..." she trails off.

The first three days after the initial surgery, Galen didn't talk. When doctors discovered bleeding in his abdomen, he had to undergo a second operation in which they removed a liter of blood.

"After the second surgery he was – that day – talking. We could tell he was going to be alright." Dr. Horacek says.

Mrs. Horacek knew he was starting to return to his old self when he woke up abruptly one day and asked, "Did you know that a cheetah is faster than a lion?"



The Horacek family

photo by Chris Fritchie

The most gratifying sign of recovery for her was when her son was finally able to say "Mama."

On August 15th, 47 days after being admitted to the hospital, Galen went home.

The Horaceks have made many adjustments in their lives since the surgery. Galen must remain isolated for the first six months to avoid being exposed to germs because the anti-rejection medication he takes suppresses his immune system leaving him susceptible to infection. This is easier said than done, since the family lives on acreage that includes a pond and lots of dirt for a five-year-old to play in. It also means no trips to the fair or the mall and no contact with other children.

Mrs. Horacek stays home with Galen and home schools the kindergartener.

A teacher comes out twice a week to work with him on reading and math.

Through the family's quest to maintain his health, Galen has accumulated more medical knowledge than many adults. He's learned to swallow three pills at a time. He takes 27 doses of medication each day. At first, keeping the medicine down was the roughest part. Mrs. Horacek says it has gotten easier and listening to the Jonas Brothers relaxes him as he takes it. While Galen may eventually be weaned off much of the medication, he will continue to be on some sort of anti-rejection pill for the rest of his life.

When a family goes through such a trauma, they really see the value of community. Dr. Horacek, a member of the Frisco Rotary Club, received support from them, as well as from local optometrists who volunteered to cover for

him at Alpha Optical. His staff showed their support through fundraising and even helped sponsor a blood drive. The people Mrs. Horacek worked with at Mary Kay provided donations; her mother moved from Nebraska to help take care of the family.

Cornerstone Community Church, also known as C3, flooded the Horaceks with support when they heard the news. Besides helping with the blood drive, someone from the church visited Galen every day, bringing care packages, praise and worship CDs and other treats. His favorite CD was made and delivered by C3 worship pastor John Hurlbut. Galen knows all the songs on "Pastor John's" CD by heart and loves singing along.

Anita Janz, the Women's and Children's Pastor at C3, was amazed by the response from the church. Some women



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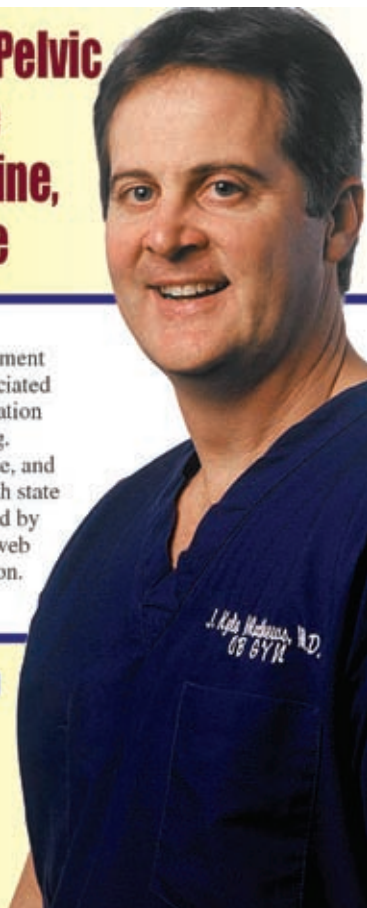
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in the congregation even helped out by cleaning the Horacek's house and doing yard work. When Galen went home from the hospital, the church provided the family with a meal every night for a month and a half.

"It brought our entire church closer together. It opened our eyes to the needs of people every day that we don't see," says Ms. Janz.

Galen has been shown the importance of being a good helper. He enjoys helping mom prepare meatloaf even though, as he describes it, "cracking the eggs is kind of yucky." Since Galen can't be around chemicals, the Horaceks have replaced all the household chemicals with natural ones that are safe for him to use. Galen can help keep the house clean – a high priority for a child with such a delicate immune system.

The Horaceks are forever grateful for the selflessness the donor family showed during their time of great loss. Using a doll to help explain, Dr. and Mrs. Horacek told Galen that he has Catherine's liver inside him and she isn't here anymore.

"He understands as much as a 5-year-old can." Mrs. Horacek says.

The doctors don't know what caused Galen's illness; they think perhaps something like a virus reacted with the liver, causing it to fail. The doctors at Children's Medical Center of Dallas are researching the problem and Galen has provided samples for their studies.

The organ donation the Horaceks received has roused them to action. All

those weeks in the hospital showed them how many other families are in similar situations. As soon as Galen is better, they plan on making it their mission to educate others about the importance of registering as an organ donor.

There are so many people that need transplants... That's their only hope for survival. We've gone online and registered officially as donors.

"You never know when you're going to need help," Dr. Horacek says, "and where it's going to come from."

Not every child is as lucky as Galen. Many die due to lack of available organs and some need multiple transplants when the first donated liver doesn't take.

Mrs. Horacek had plenty of time to ponder this while waiting in the hospital, staring out the window at the busy highway. "I was watching all these people drive by and thinking, 'I bet at least half of these people or more are not organ donors. Someone's going to die because they need a transplant.'"

Dr. Horacek explains, "You never want tragedy to happen, but you can do

something to have a positive effect. If I'm not going to make it, I can help other people live."

The Horaceks both admit organ donation was not even a consideration for them before Galen's illness. "If it doesn't hit close to home, you don't even think about it. It's got to start with each and every one of us."

The process is simple and can make such a difference in the lives of others in our community. You can register online at www.donatelifetexas.org or when you apply for or renew your driver license.

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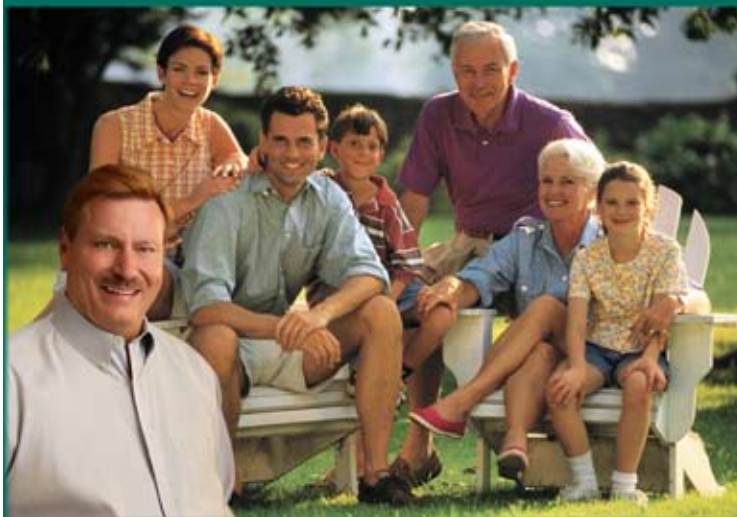
The Horaceks know it's easy to push the issue to the back of your mind; it's hard to face one's own mortality. But everyone holds the ability to help others. As a grateful father can tell you.

"It allowed him to live," says Dr. Horacek. "It's really the gift of life."

The fishing pond and dirt may be off limits for now, but Galen has a long, stuffed snake and, of course, his tiny caterpillar crawling around inside the paper cup to satisfy his love of the outdoors. Whether he realizes it now or not, Galen's been given something real and priceless – a future.

Angela Smith is a frequent contributor to Frisco STYLE Magazine. She lives with her family in Frisco.

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