

Palmdale girl battling defect in heart

Four-year-old has ailment that affects flow of blood

By JULIE DRAKE Valley Press Staff Writer 4 hrs ago 0



Elmo dolls have been constant companions for four-year-old Lyanna Starks during her battle with pulmonary atresia with intact ventricular septum. This photo taken days apart in October.

Photo courtesy of Shadonna Starks

PALMDALE — Four-year-old Lyanna Minter was born with a congenital heart defect.

Lyanna's mother, Shadonna Starks, was 20 weeks pregnant when Lyanna was diagnosed with pulmonary atresia with intact ventricular septum. In Lyanna's heart, the valve that allows blood to travel from her heart to her lungs did not work properly due to blockage.

Lyanna had a mini-heart attack when she was still in the womb; she had her first open heart surgery one month after her birth in December 2016. Her second open heart surgery about two years ago prolonged her life.

"It's not a cure. ... Surgery can fix certain things and it can prolong life," Starks said in a phone call.

At five months old, Lyanna was diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension, where the blood vessels that carry blood from the heart to the lungs can become stiff and narrow, making the heart work harder to pump blood through. That caused Lyanna to have a tracheostomy.

"It's a tube in the throat," Starks said.

Doctors cautioned Starks about the surgery.

"They told us all the bad things about the tracheostomy," Starks recalled. "They said that it comes with nurses; the kid can stop breathing because a tube might actually come out," Starks said.

The mother of four said doctors gave them every reason not to do the surgery because they did not think the family would be able to care for Lyanna.

"They gave us an option," Starks said. "They were like, 'You guys can either learn how to take care of her for these six weeks and have your life change, or you can just let her breathe on her own until she stops breathing.' And I told them, 'There is no other option; this is my child and I will do whatever I have to do so that my child can live and come home.'"

Lyanna spent the first eight months of her life in the hospital. She came home Aug. 1, 2017, with a ventilator, tracheostomy, feeding tube and nurses.

"If you see her she doesn't look like there's anything wrong with her on the outside," Starks said.

Lyanna has two older sisters, Ja'Veyah, 11, and Jasmire, eight, and a six-year-old brother, Shjuan.

"They love Lyanna," Starks said. "They love to play with her. They wrestle with her as if she's normal; they treat her just like she's normal."

Lyanna is learning how to walk now. She is behind due to being in the hospital for so long. Her siblings are helping her.

"They are the reason that she is crawling now and playful because she wants to follow their lead," Starks said. "Actually, them being home since COVID really, really helped her a lot."

Starks and her husband Jay lost their jobs after Lyanna was born. Jay helps take care of the children after injuring himself.

"We had to learn how to care for her," Starks said.

A social worker connected the couple with Miracles for Kids, an Orange County-based nonprofit organization that paid their rent for one year.

"After the year was up they would also send Christmas gifts for the kids," Starks said. "And it's not like small gifts. ... Whatever the kids asked for they got the kids for Christmas."

Since Iyanna is home, the family is no longer in the Miracles for Kids program that pays their rent. They continue to receive gift baskets and Christmas gifts for the children and personal protective equipment such as facemasks, hand sanitizer and cleaning supplies, Starks said.

"They've been sending us stuff for four years," Starks said.

Miracles for Kids CEO and co-founder Autumn Strier said they ship monthly kindness boxes filled with items such as PPE, clothing, gift cards and arts and crafts and school supplies to more than 300 families a day on average, or about 1,500 individuals year round.

"Anything that is useful we bring in and then we ship out to families," Strier said.

The nonprofit organization also does quarterly food deliveries. They have been shipping PPE for the past year.

"We average a family being with us for about four years," Strier said.

Starks thanked Miracles for Kids for their support.

"If it wasn't for them, we would probably be evicted," Starks said.

Starks' full-time job is taking care of Iyanna. Iyanna takes medication every four hours. She is seen by a cardiologist every six months.

Iyanna also had a feeding tube, so she has had four life-saving surgeries.

"I cook all of her food and blend them for year," Starks said.

The family was prepared when the COVID-19 pandemic forced safer-at-home orders last year.

"We were already used to being at home," Starks said.

The family already practiced safe cleanliness measures with disinfectants.

"We know how to keep ourselves safe so we don't bring her nothing home because we're already used to it," Starks said."

Iyanna loves all things Elmo and Sesame Street. She has an Elmo bed and three Elmo dolls.

"She's crazy about Elmo," Starks said.