



Where Do Broken Hearts Go?

Calgary, AB (February 9, 2008) – The date of March 21, 2004 forever changed the lives of Tracey and John Contrada. This was the day that their daughter, Ava Contrada was born. This was also the day that Tracey and John began their search to find out where broken hearts go.

In the days following her birth, the Contradas learned that little Ava had Congenital Heart Disease (CHD). Congenital Heart Disease is a general term that is used to describe many types of heart malformations. Ava's heart is unique in many ways. She was born with Left Ventricular Noncompaction which means the left ventricle of the heart has difficulty in creating the squeeze that is needed to send the blood to the body. She also had several Ventricular Septal Defects (VSDs) which are also known as 'holes in the heart'. These holes in the wall of the heart permit oxygenated and unoxygenated blood to mix decreasing the amount of oxygenated blood that gets to the body. In addition to her heart malformations, Ava also had a number of blood clots, kidney reflux, acid reflux and intermittent exotropia (an outward turn of the eye).

So where do broken hearts go? First, it is to the cardiology clinic at the Alberta Children's Hospital. The Cardiology Clinic at the Alberta Children's Hospital logs over 4,600 clinic visits each year seeing children aged zero to 18 years. Care is provided by five pediatric cardiologists and a complement of cardiology trained staff. "We have been given incredible support from Dr. Dicke, Patty Knox and Kelly Webber at the ACH Cardiology Clinic," says Tracey. There is also the community of family and friends, with Tracey and John having a far-reaching circle.

"Unfortunately," says Tracey, "While family and friends try to be empathetic, they cannot truly understand what you go through as parents of a child with CHD. Connecting with families in the Heart Beats community has provided us with a much needed cushion of support!" The Heart Beats Children's Society of Calgary (www.heartbeats.ca) is a grass roots registered charitable organization offering information, resources and emotional support to families dealing with Congenital Heart Disease (CHD) including support groups such as Heart to Heart, targeted to parents and their children, and Off Beats which is designed to support tweens and teens in a peer setting.

"The Heart to Heart group has been fantastic! The support offered, and advice given has enabled us to understand and effectively deal with Ava's challenges — especially around feeding," explains Tracey. After her birth, Ava left the hospital with a feeding tube — as well as 11 different medications and two daily shots of Enoxaparin (a blood thinner which is used to help break up blood clots). It took nine months before Ava's progress was sufficient to remove the feeding tube and stop the Enoxaparin shots. Today, all of her VSDs (or 'holes' in her heart) have closed and only one tiny blood clot remains. Ava remains on medications to help the left side of her heart squeeze.

"And," she adds, "Each month we look forward to connecting with our newfound friends at Heart to Heart. Our first year with our daughter was profoundly impacted by Heart Beats and we are so grateful!" In addition to her involvement in Heart to Heart, Tracey has since become involved in the Heart Beats' executive allowing her to provide even more support to other families in need.

This year, on March 21, Ava will turn four years old. To say John and Tracey are grateful for Ava's life is an understatement. "To be able to celebrate Ava's fourth birthday is such a privilege!" says Tracey. "We feel Ava has been blessed by so many gifts over her short lifespan, especially the support from the Alberta Children's Hospital, our family and friends, and Heart Beats."

February 7-14 is Congenital Heart Defect Awareness week in Calgary. An estimated 180,000 Canadians have Congenital Heart Disease (CHD) of which, approximately 8,000 reside in the Calgary area. How can you help during this week? Visit the Heart Beats' Website (www.heartbeats.ca) to learn more about Congenital Heart Disease. You may send an e-card to let others know that you care about children with this condition. You may also donate to Heart Beats to help provide financial assistance to families having difficulties meeting expenses related to their child's heart defect.

The Heart Beats Children's Society of Calgary (www.heartbeats.ca) is a grass roots registered charitable organization offering information, resources and emotional support to families dealing with Congenital Heart Disease (CHD). Since 1987, our group of parents, caregivers and professionals have provided practical and compassionate service to children and families impacted by Congenital Heart Disease (CHD).

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For further information, please contact:

Note: Heart Beats is holding its Annual Family Event on Saturday, February 9th, 2008 from 4:00 – 7:00pm at the Calgary Winter Club Bowling Lanes. Photo opportunity to accompany this story.

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