



Photo by Taci Fast, Millyrose Photography

Micro-Preemie Mom Ashle Stratton

“With Trinity, everything is a milestone. When she touches our faces, it’s a milestone. When she touches her foot, it’s a milestone. We don’t care when they do things, but we celebrate every time they do them.”

~Ashle Stratton

Ashle and Jamie Stratton’s twins had a five-percent chance of survival at birth.

Trinity and Tripp were born after only 23 weeks and two days’ gestation. That’s barely more than halfway through a full-term pregnancy. A nurse later told Ashle that they didn’t expect her daughter to live through the first night. “My OB said, ‘You might as well prepare yourself; your little girl is not going to make it,’” Ashle says. “I said, ‘If you want me to stay calm, you will stop saying that.’”

Today, Tripp is pulling himself up on the furniture in their Crown Heights home. He gleefully plunges his hand into a container of Cheerios and eats a few, but mostly he likes the feel and the sound of his fingers crashing into the little O’s. Nearby, nurse Yvonne Shively, who has become part of the family, holds his sister, who has a little more catching up to do.

Trinity is fed seven times a day with a pump that connects to a port in her tiny tummy. She wears a teeny pair of glasses to correct vision problems stemming from retinopathy of prematurity, a common preemie complication that also required surgery. She doesn’t crawl. But Trinity smiles often at her parents, and she responds to favorite books like *Hippos Go Berserk*.

It was Trinity’s amniotic sac that burst in September 2007, when Ashle was just 22 weeks along. She wasn’t due until January, and so far, her pregnancy had been problem-free. Ashle and husband, Jamie, who is wine director at Jacob Liquor Exchange, raced to Wesley Medical Center, terrified they were about to lose the son and daughter they had waited so long to meet. After three years of struggling with infertility, the Strattons had found success with in vitro fertilization.

The medical team tried to keep the babies in utero as long as possible. If born at 24 weeks or later, Ashle could receive a steroid shot to boost the babies’ lung development. “We decided to do everything we could to save them, without making them suffer,” Ashle says. “We told everyone around us to pray for us to make it to 24 weeks.”



Left: Ashle and Jamie Stratton celebrated their twin's first Christmas at Wesley Medical Center.

Below: Ashle holding Tripp for the very first time.



The couple prepared to spend the next three months in the hospital. With a phone and laptop, Ashle tied up loose ends for her job as public relations coordinator for the Wichita Art Museum. But less than ten days later, she went into labor.

Trinity Blu was born on the afternoon of September 27, 2007, weighing 1 pound, 6 ounces. Her amniotic fluid, which aids in the development of the lungs, kidneys and gastrointestinal tract, had dried up completely. The doctors tried to keep Tripp in the womb, but Ashle's labor resumed that night. As a result, the twins have different birthdays — Tripp Charles arrived about 1:30 a.m. on September 28, at 1 pound, 9.5 ounces. The babies' heads were no larger than tennis balls, their bodies the length of a ruler.

"Every day I'm still amazed and in awe of the fact that I have my children," Ashle says. "For whatever reason, they hung in there and they're here."

Prayer carried the Strattons through the first tenuous weeks of their micro-preemies' lives. For the next three months, the NICU was their second home. Their parents also visited the twins often — Ashle's mom, Terry Burnett, visited nearly every day. It was a month before they could hold Tripp, longer for Trinity. The week of Thanksgiving, Ashle got her wish: to hold her daughter for the first time.

After 97 days, Tripp came home in early January. Trinity stayed seven weeks longer. They had spent so long in the hospital that the Strattons

recorded sounds from the NICU to play at home for comfort. The new parents also had to learn how to work all of their medical equipment — sleep apnea and oxygen monitors, and for Trinity, the feeding pump.

The twins are now 19 months old, but their adjusted age is about 15 months. Tripp wears clothes meant for one-year-olds, while Trinity's size is 9-12 months. They get regular home visits from occupational, physical and speech therapists through Rainbows United.

Trinity's motor and muscle control is limited and the big goal for her right now is learning to eat by mouth. Unlike most babies and toddlers, she resists anything in her mouth besides her own hand. Ashle says they believe her strong oral aversion comes from being on a ventilator for so many months. "You take for granted that your child is going to be able to eat," Ashle says.

Now the twins get water therapy once a week and are already showing progress with it. Often, children will master skills in the water before they can do them on land. The weekly trips to the pool are welcome outings, especially after the family virtually hibernated all winter to avoid exposure to dangerous viruses like RSV.

But according to Ashle, they're starting to feel more like a typical family; from eating out to having play dates. The focus on their care is not as intense, so it's getting easier to simply enjoy their toddlers as any parents would.

Having extended family close by helps take

the pressure off, too. Grandmother Terry Burnett says, "I always knew I'd be heavily involved with my grandchildren, although I didn't expect this."

Burnett has learned a lot about her daughter in the last year and a half. "She's phenomenal. She's a very strong female who has handled the whole situation extremely well." Ashle returns the compliment immediately, "I had to learn strength from someone."

But if asked who is the toughest of them all, both mothers are in complete agreement:

"My kids — they're the strongest little people I know," Ashle says, "especially my little girl. I told her she was going to prove those doctors wrong, and she did it." 🌈

~ERIN PERRY O'DONNELL

For more information about prematurity and special-needs infants, visit www.MarchofDimes.com and www.RainbowsUnited.org