

## **Alex Mather: The Kid with the Crooked Face**

*“The face is the mirror of the mind, and the eyes without speaking confess  
the secrets of the heart.”*

St. Jerome, 420 A.D.

“You’re pregnant,” the salty haired doctor announced as Sheri Mather buttoned her blouse.

“What a blessing,” she whispered to herself. “A dream come true.”

As the radiant, 29-year-old, mother-to-be set about preparing for her first child, she busied herself with plans for the nursery in their family home in the small town of Salina, Texas – just north of Plano. She regretted having to leave the obstetrician she saw initially in Fort Worth, where she and her dashing husband, an officer in the Air Force, had been living. They decided to move to the spacious, comfortable house that had been in Sheri’s family of generations to take advantage of the small-town environment -- now that they were beginning the family they had only imagined.

As she researched car seats and began to make her list of names, she did not miss a beat in locating a new obstetrician to continue her pre-natal care. Her doctor informed her it was time for the Alpha-feta Protein test, a routine screen for possible birth defects. Sheri did not give it a second thought. After all, their families had no history of problems, and she was healthy.

But her world as she knew it was about to change drastically in ways she had never imagined.

“We found something,” her doctor cautioned. “No need to worry. We’ll do a Level II sonogram to check it out.”

Sheri and her husband sat in shock and silence.

“This can’t be happening to me, not my baby,” she uttered quietly. But, the results of AFP test would profoundly alter Sheri’s life and the life of her family forever.

“There is evidence of a neural tube defect,” said the doctor. “We can’t be sure, but looks like he may be hydrocephalic – water on the brain.”

“What? I can’t even begin to process this news. I can’t begin to describe my feelings of distress and horror,” said Sheri. “Here I was worrying about nursery colors, and now I am wondering if my baby will live.”

What made things even more excruciating was the lack of definite information – the not knowing and the trepidation. And that point, in her ultimate sense of helplessness, she prayed to God to take over. “I cannot do this myself, Lord,” she prayed.

The myriad sonograms along the way had revealed that she was expecting a boy. He was due on December 5. Grounded in her own faith and the faith of her husband, she was committed to carrying the pregnancy to term.

Therefore, she was horrified when her Plano-area obstetrician had suggested an induction at six months “end her suffering” along with the pregnancy. Repulsed by the expedient attitude of her doctor, she returned to her original obstetrician in Fort Worth. Though he had known nothing of the diagnosis, she felt confident he would share her commitment to the birth of her child. She was right.

Still, from this point on, the questions and the fears intensified. They had sonogram after sonogram – too many to count. They were told their baby boy had spina bifida, as well. Every examination and every test seemed to reveal a new dimension to her child’s abnormalities – so unusual that the doctor’s claimed never having seen the combination before.

“Why was this happening to me?” she lamented over and over again. “I never took any unusual drugs, never smoked – have always had a healthy lifestyle. I did everything right. I don’t understand. Why, God? ”

She confides that this experience also became a true journey of faith, a fundamental belief in the power of God that actually deepened and broadened throughout this process. She explains that she was sincerely comforted by God’s presence in the smallest of ways. She recounts that Alex spoke his first word at about age one and a half on Mother’s Day – as she was driving in the car with her own mother, his grandmother. Four generations together celebrated his progress and his persistent spirit.

“He said ‘high school,’” she recounts. “Not sure exactly why, but it was one of the best Mother’s Day gifts I ever received. As we faced each new day, I learned to find God in the everyday moments of wonder - something I never did prior to Alex’s arrival. In many ways, this has been just as significant journey for me as for Alex.”

Alex Mather was born at Harris Methodist Hospital in Fort Worth on January 31, 1992, with a unilateral cleft lip, clubfeet, a scalp defect that exposed the brain on the top of his head, and the hydrocephalic condition they had detected earlier. He did not have spina bifida.

With Sheri still sedated after her C-section, the doctors suggested to her husband they “just let nature take its course” and not attempt to close the gaping opening on the top of their son’s head. They felt the combination of deformities was just too much to address in the struggling infant. Though Sheri was not coherent enough to consult on the decision, her husband declined the suggestion vehemently on her behalf.

“He is our son,” he protested. “And we believe he deserves every chance we can give them him to live.” Though doctors had never treated this type of deformity of the head, they decided their only option was to close the scalp through surgery. Closing the scalp instead of applying skin grafts would mean Alex would have a full head of hair, yet this decision that would cause problems later and lead to the need for additional surgeries and repair.

“But at least, we saved our child’s life,” Sheri tearfully proclaims. “They inserted the shunt to drain the fluid, and word from the surgeons was that the brain actually ‘looked good.’”

“From that point forward, we spent our lives in doctors’ offices – plastic surgeons in Ft. Worth and in Plano – back and forth, but they never really communicated confidence in their ability to help Alex. They always seems somewhat tentative – until we met Dr. Kenneth Salyer.”

“Dr. Rogers at North Dallas Pediatrics was extraordinary,” she describes.” He and his staff became members of our family, and he was the one who recommended we see Dr. Salyer for Alex’s cleft surgery.”

“I felt such relief when I met Dr. Salyer. He was the only doctor I had every met who just gave me a big hug and said that everything was going to be all right. What a sigh of relief. I finally sensed that confidence that I had been seeking. Thank the Lord,” she thought. “I finally felt that my life was not ending at age 30.”

“This will be no problem at all, “ said Dr. Salyer as he looked carefully at Alex for the first time.

Since his first visit with Dr. Salyer, Alex has had 15 surgeries and countless other procedures, including cranial vault remodeling surgeries, shunt revisions and multiple foot surgeries. We are about to launch the orthodontic process or to reposition the interior of the mouth and the palette.

Sheri was miraculously undaunted throughout the entire ordeal. Her commitment to helping her son thrive is remarkable – to this day. And she is in constant awe of his ability to cope with his abnormalities and the sometimes-cruel world. “He genuinely likes who he is,” she says. “And he openly accepts everyone – from the bullies, the nerds, to the most popular kids in school, they seem to accept him. It’s his amazing attitude.”

“I believe God gives children with special needs special talents. Alex has always been so outgoing. His zest for life is inspiring and so heartening for me. I really think this exceptional self-confidence helps him compensate and thrive in his own way.”

Alex is now doing well in school in their current home near Shreveport, Louisiana. Sheri says she is grateful for the support the Salina community gave her, her son and her family throughout their early journey, but people do point and stare. She recounts one encounter when a child pointed at Alex and asked, “Why does that kid have a crooked face”? It just made Sheri “cry inside,” but at age five, Alex responded with complete assurance, “God made me that way.”