

LOCAL

# Book of Dreams: Khya's short life inspires mother, family

By Niesha Gates - Special to The Bee

NOVEMBER 29, 2013 10:21 PM

The week before her death, 2-year-old Khya Polk-Thompson lay on her sister Nesha's lap and brushed her fingers on Nesha's hand, her way of showing affection.

Nesha, 19, kissed Khya's temple gently and held her close, rubbing her sister's feet. The journey has inspired a career for Nesha, who is attending Sacramento City College.

"I want to go into nursing," she said. The Book of Dreams has been asked to provide three laptops for the family, one of which will be for Nesha, to help in her quest to enter the medical field.

On the afternoon of Nov. 22, she was beside her mother, Stephanie Spidell, and younger sister Myesha as Khya drew her last breath. Services for Khya will be held at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday at Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Sacramento.

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Stephanie Spidell said she and her children are coping with Khya's death better than she anticipated.

"I know how much I advocated for my daughter and how well I did my best to take care of her and loved her unconditionally and gave her a chance in life," Spidell said. "I'm sad and I get confused because I'm used to this routine

of it taking time to get places and getting her stroller out of the car and feeding her every two hours. But I'm at peace. I'm at peace knowing she's at peace, running and talking and doing all the things she was limited to do here."

Khya had holoprosencephaly – a brain malformation. She never walked or talked, was fed through a tube and suffered seizures.

When doctors determined Khya's condition in utero, they said the baby likely wouldn't survive the pregnancy, and if she did, likely would only live minutes or hours.

"They said, 'Just terminate the pregnancy,'" Spidell said.

She remembers the day vividly. The Christmas season was in full swing and her four children and niece all were home from school.

Spidell donned her favorite velvet pants and soft, gray sweater – maternity clothes she had received from the Sacramento Life Center – and like every morning of her pregnancy, ate a bowl of oatmeal.

She was heading to an appointment that morning for a secondary ultrasound. Doctors suspected Khya had a cleft lip and wanted to do more imaging to prepare for next steps.

The whispers boomed in Spidell's ears as she lay on the examining table.

“They were looking at the pictures and I could hear them whispering, ‘This is wrong,’” Spidell said.

As she looked at images of her unborn daughter, doctors delivered the news. Her children cried as she broke the news of Khya’s diagnosis. Spidell was resolved to let God steer the course of Khya’s life, defying doctors’ recommendations to have an abortion.

Spidell told her children that they’d use the rest of the pregnancy to make memories and prepare to say goodbye to their sister upon her birth.

But when Khya arrived, despite the crowd of specialists in the delivery room, all she needed was the normal suction babies receive to breathe and treatment for jaundice.

Minutes turned onto hours. Hours turned into days. Days turned into years. This year, the family will celebrate Khya’s short life in the midst of the holiday season.

The family has inspired many at the Sacramento Life Center, a nonprofit health clinic and organization that works with pregnant women and their families.

“Stephanie is my hero – she’s so strong,” said Marie Leatherby, the center’s executive director. “As hard as we all know it is, she just keeps going.”

Spidell hopes to one day start a foundation in Khya’s honor for families grappling with similar situations.

“Her memory will continue,” Spidell said. “I want other people to know that life can continue even with a diagnosis that says something is incompatible with life. This is a new beginning for her, and a new beginning for me.”

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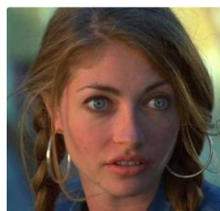
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