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 Jason and Tera Aubuchant are fighting for 8-month-old Hunter's survival. Now they want to help others. (Michael Bupp/The Sentinel)

### Healing hearts

By [Joseph Cress](#), January 28, 2007

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Hunter was stubborn even before he left the womb.

Parents Tera and Jason Aubuchant recall sitting in a hospital room for two hours while a doctor tried to take sonograms of the developing fetus.

The baby boy would not cooperate. Every time the doctor lined up a photo, Hunter would turn or move his body or block the camera with his tiny hand.

But the ultrasound image of his face is what made his parents fall in love with the infant diagnosed with a congenital heart defect.

The Aubuchants had the option of terminating the pregnancy, but seeing Hunter so active gave them hope he could make it through.

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Now the Carlisle couple can smile at the memory of Hunter giving them the thumbs-up sign weeks before his birth last May 6.

“He’s a little trooper,” says Tera Aubuchant, 24, sitting in the living room of her Carlwynne Manor apartment. “He’s a very happy baby.”

“He has done better than expected,” adds Sgt. Jason Aubuchant, 25, a medic in the U.S. Army assigned to the Dunham clinic at Carlisle Barracks.

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Hunter weighed eight pounds at birth and, developmentally, he is right on track for a child his age, the sergeant says.

### **Heart defect discovered**

The couple was devastated 20 weeks into the pregnancy when a routine check found Hunter was missing a well-developed right ventricle.

The father explained the tricuspid valve in the right chamber of his son's heart failed to open cutting off adequate blood supply to the heart muscle.

As a result, the right ventricle of Hunter's heart never fully developed. The right ventricle pumps blood into the lungs where it receives oxygen before returning to the left side of the heart which pumps the blood throughout the body.

The prognosis looked grim for the family. Husband and wife had such high hopes for a healthy child only to be told Hunter had a 60- to 70 percent chance of survival.

Doctors advised them his condition, known as tricuspid atresia, may be a sign of some other serious birth defect such as Down Syndrome. The couple had medical staff draw amniotic fluid to test Hunter's DNA. The tests came back negative.

The couple sought help from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, which gave Hunter a 95 percent chance of survival.

The Aubuchants had reason to hope. Hunter would have been worse off if his condition affected the left ventricle of the heart.

### **Straight to ICU**

Still, at just three days old, Hunter was subjected to the first of three surgeries designed to bypass blood to the lungs around the missing right ventricle.

Necessity forced hospital staff to transfer Hunter directly from the maternity ward to an intensive care unit. Tera Aubuchant had to wait 12 hours to see her son.

The father says the hardest part for Hunter was not being allowed to eat food for the first few days of his life as medical staff worked to schedule the first procedure.

The first operation was only temporary to allow Hunter to grow. The second procedure, done at six months, was more involved and used pressure from the left side of the heart to pump blood into the lungs.

The parents had to learn to handle Hunter with care. The operations required surgeons to break open Hunter's sternum so they could reach the heart. While it heals, the baby boy is not allowed to crawl or sleep on his tummy.

Tera Aubuchant says her son will probably never be able to play contact sports nor could he run as fast or as far as other boys his age because of low oxygen saturation in his blood.

Hunter will have to wait until he is 2 or 3 years old for the third and final procedure to correct the tricuspid atresia. In the meantime, he has to take aspirin every day to thin the blood so his heart does not have to work so hard. The baby boy has been lucky not to develop problems with low body weight normally associated with congenital heart defects, Jason Aubuchant says. In fact, Hunter became a celebrity before his second surgery.

Word got around the hospital of the chubby boy and many on staff went to visit Hunter in the ICU, Tera Aubuchant says.



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“They’ve never seen a fat heart baby. He’s tough.”

Hunter has to visit a cardiologist once every two months and take shots monthly to keep his immune system strong enough to feed off pneumonia and other respiratory infections.

### **Couple organizes bake sale**

Tera and Jason Aubuchant of Carlisle are organizing a bake sale for 9 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 10, at the Wal-Mart Store on Noble Boulevard to benefit three organizations helping children with heart defects.

One-half of the proceeds will benefit research at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The balance will be split between the Congenital Heart Information Network and Little Hearts Inc.

The network promotes Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Week, Feb. 7-14, and provides information to parents and the public. It maintains a website at [tchin.org/aware](http://tchin.org/aware).

Little Hearts Inc. provides support services to families, a listing of resources and on-line stories about children diagnosed with congenital heart defects at its website [www.littlehearts.org](http://www.littlehearts.org).

“These organizations kept us going,” says Jason Aubuchant, whose son has tricuspid atresia. “We wanted to give something back. “

His wife adds, even if the sale raises a few dollars, it is a few dollars more for research the hospital did not have before. “They care so much for the kids.”

The couple was impressed by the attention their case received from hospital staff. They are not asking the public for donations of baked goods, only for support the day of the event.

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