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Affairs of the heart

By: Frank Mustac
02/07/2007

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Family Photo: At left, Will Reilly, 5, with his younger brother Collin, who will undergo his third open-heart surgical procedure around the time of his third birthday in April to help correct a congenital heart defect.

With Valentine's Day around the corner and people focusing on affairs of the figurative heart, there are some who are turning their attention to the blood-pumping physical organ itself.

The week of Feb. 7-14 has been designated Congenital Heart Defect Awareness Week - an international campaign designed to increase public awareness of congenital heart defects and childhood heart disease.

Congenital heart defects affect about 40,000 newborn babies each year in the United States alone, and congenital heart disease is considered the most common birth defect worldwide and the leading cause of birth-defect-related deaths.

"It's about early testing so families know this is coming before the baby is born," said Fairfax City Councilman Jeffrey Greenfield, whose 5-month-old daughter, Alexandra, has already undergone surgery at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia to repair a heart defect.

"She was two weeks old when they found the problem. They didn't realize Alexandra had a chamber of her heart missing," said Greenfield, who, with his wife, Lisa, will take their daughter to Philadelphia for two more open heart procedures



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over the next three years or so.

The Reilly family, also from Fairfax City, is preparing for their son Collin's third heart operation of his young life.

"We're getting ready for his third open heart surgery at the end of April," said Collin's mother, Beckie Reilly.

Born in April 2004, Collin Reilly was diagnosed with an undeveloped heart condition called hypoplastic left heart syndrome. The defect was discovered by chance 10 days before he was born thanks to a sonogram performed prior to the

C-section childbirth his mother's doctor had recommended.

Collin's first open heart surgery, also in Philadelphia, was performed when he was six days old.

"I thought about a lot of other things that could go wrong," said Beckie Reilly, worried about such possible birth defects as Down syndrome but not a heart defect.

Because of their son's medical condition, Reilly and her husband, Billy, have become involved with an organization called Tender Hearts, a support group affiliated with Inova Health System for parents of children who have a cardiac condition.

The group will hold a doughnut sale fund-raiser at Inova Fairfax Hospital on Valentine's Day morning, Feb. 14.

Reilly said that, because of his heart condition, Collin, whom she described as sweet and smart, often huffs and puffs as he runs around often playing with his older brother, Will.

"We try to keep him as healthy as possible," said Reilly, adding that Collin will not likely be able to play contact sports when he gets older. "We're hoping he likes golf."

Nowadays, Reilly said, she appreciates a lot of things more than she used to.

"We consider ourselves to be very lucky," she said.

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