

Minutes to memories

By Brett Buckner
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Nine minutes.

That's all the time Aimee Weathers was given to hold her baby daughter. Nine minutes to take in every detail — from the curl in each of her tiny toes to her crown of jet black hair. Nine minutes to whisper "I love you" in her ear; to memorize the way she wiggled her arms and pursed her lips as if to cry, though she never made a sound, never took a breath.

Nine minutes.

Enough time for Aimee's husband, Carlton Weathers, pastor of Grace Fellowship Church, still wearing scrubs, to hold her hand and sing a hymn. It was enough time for him to read her a Bible verse, Psalm 23:

"...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me ..."

Nine minutes, and then she was gone, still lying on her mother's chest in the delivery room surrounded by doctors and nurses all prepared for the inevitable.



Photo: Courtesy/Jerrod Brown Studios

"She died right there in my arms," Aimee says. "In those moments, we were given memories to last a lifetime."

Aimee Weathers is sitting on the couch in her Jacksonville home with a photo album of black-and-white ultrasound printouts open across her lap. These are some of the lasting images that she has of her daughter. Images that, to the innocent, untrained eyes, appear like any other ultrasound pictures. But to a mother, they tell an entirely different story. In these images are where life becomes reality, where dreams of the future take shape.

But not for Aimee and Carlton Weathers.

On Tuesday, Jan. 22, at 8:46 p.m., Sophie Ann Weathers was born, weighing 3 pounds, 15 ounces. She was 21 inches long.

Sophie Ann was also born with a rare "chromosomal anomaly" known as Trisomy 13. Of the 1 in 10,000 babies born with this condition each year, 80 percent die within the first month.

Though overwhelmed by sorrow and a pain that would later leave her mother's empty arms literally aching, Sophie's death was not a surprise.

For 18 weeks, Aimee carried her daughter knowing that there would be no miracles, knowing that she simply could not live outside the womb. But that was the heartbreaking choice that Aimee and Carlton made together — to bring a child into the world knowing it was going to die.

"We were not in control of this life," Aimee says, her voice soft and pleading. "God gave us this child and God was going to take this life when He decided. It's not up to us."

Now, Aimee Weathers — along with a pair of mothers, Laura Huene and Corie O'Brien, both from Denver, Colo.,

whose children suffered the same fate as Sophie Ann — is spearheading String of Pearls, a non-profit foundation that aims to comfort the pregnancies of women whose children are terminal.

"Every life has a purpose," Aimee says. "No matter how short that life is, something good, something positive can come out of it."

Fear in intuition

Aimee and Carlton Weathers always wanted a big family.

Already "blessed" with two healthy children — Hannah Grace, 5, and Noah, 3, and in the midst of adopting a young girl from China, when Aimee found out on July 3 that she was pregnant, their house erupted with excitement.

Even though her OB/GYN, Dr. James Daniel, initially saw nothing to worry about, Aimee was haunted by the feeling that something was wrong with her unborn child.

"I just knew," she says with a forced smile. "Looking back, I think it was the Lord preparing me for the worst."

On Sept. 20, Aimee and Carlton went in for a routine ultrasound. Lying on a table and crying in the dark while Carlton held her hand, Aimee stared up at the TV monitor projecting murky images of her baby — all the time pleading, "Is it OK?"

After the exam, they were sent out into the lobby to wait for the doctor, where they began calling friends and family with the good news ... "It's a girl," they shouted time and time again.

When they were finally called back to meet with the doctor, Daniel could hardly speak, until, with tears in his eyes, he confirmed what Aimee had somehow known all along.

"We've seen some abnormalities," he said. "It looks pretty severe."

According to the ultrasound, in the cranium where there were supposed to be swirls of white and gray, there was only darkness. Sophie didn't have a brain, only a brain stem.

And while it would take further genetic testing to be certain, it looked as if the Weathers' unborn baby had one of three varieties of Trisomy — 21, 18 or 13. Trisomy 21 was Down's Syndrome, while the other two were "almost always fatal," Daniel said.

A week later an amniocentesis performed at UAB confirmed Daniel's earlier assessment. There was no rhyme or reason. Aimee was only 30 years old and in great health, but her baby would not survive.

It was there, in that strange office, that Aimee and Carlton were first asked if they wanted to have an abortion. While she admits the thought crossed her mind "briefly," terminating this pregnancy was never a real option.

"We knew what we were going to do," she says. "I was going to do whatever I could to enjoy every minute with this baby."

With two young children always asking questions and noticing the changes to Mommy's belly, Carlton and Aimee had to decide exactly how to talk to Hannah Grace and Noah about Sophie.

"We were always open and honest ... no secrets," Aimee says. "We talked a lot about heaven, how Sophie was not going to live and that Jesus was going to take her home."

For 18 weeks, Aimee carried Sophie, knowing that with each passing day, their time together — like Sophie's life — was growing shorter. It was a difficult pregnancy because her mind was constantly drifting. Every kick, every movement was a reminder of the gift that would soon be taken away.

"Everyday I was dealing with the fact this was short term," Aimee says, her fingers folded into small fists. "You

don't plan funerals for your child when you're pregnant.

"I didn't have baby showers. I got sympathy cards."

But, as she would soon discover, Aimee was not alone. By sheer coincidence, in the weeks prior to learning that she was pregnant, Aimee started an on-line blog as a way of posting family pictures and keeping friends up-to-date with the adoption process.

After Sophie's diagnosis, the blog was cathartic, offering a way for both Aimee and Carlton to share their story without having to repeat the painful details over and over again.

By combining Bible verses with blunt honest, Aimee's diary-like entries were tender, vulnerable and inspirational. Not only friends and family, but total strangers from across the country visited the site and e-mailed words of encouragements.

Among them was Corie O'Brien, a pregnant mother of four whose unborn son, Larson, had also been diagnosed with Trisomy 13 and was due five weeks ahead of Sophie.

Their friendship was immediate.

Rarely did a day pass without a least one anxious phone call. Their bond was so tight, that it's no wonder the two women went into labor on the same day — Jan. 22, 2008, which was also the 35th anniversary of the Rowe v. Wade Supreme Court decision that made abortions legal in the United States.

While Aimee was only given nine minutes, Corie had 23 hours with her son, long enough to hear him cry. It was a sound she will never forget because during his short life Larson taught Corie and her family more about love than they could ever have learned without him.

"He did not just come here only to be held for a day," she says. "I know that I want to honor his life by sharing it with others and by walking alongside another woman on the same path."

A 'new' normal

It's been two months since Sophie Ann Weathers died and there is still so much pain.

Sometimes Aimee's arms ache to hold her daughter. At night, laying awake in the darkness, her eyes drift to the empty spot on the other side of the bed where a cradle should be. But rather than a nursery and a sleeping baby to check in on, Aimee Weathers has a grave marker with her daughter's name to visit.

"It's not normal to bury your child," Aimee says, her emotions still so raw. "But I have no regrets. My baby had a name," she says. "She was a sister. She was a daughter and a granddaughter.

"She was real to us, and she'll always be a part of this family."

Having made this heartbreaking journey, Aimee says she would make the same decision "in a heartbeat." She has her memories. To the vigilant mother, nine minutes can be an eternity.

With a flip of her wrist, Aimee reveals the impossible. Her family photo album is filled with more than grainy ultrasound pictures. She and Carlton had the foresight to hire a photographer to capture every intimate moment of Sophie Ann's brief life.

Jacksonville photographer Jerrod Brown is a member of a non-profit foundation called Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, which works closely with parents of terminal children.

Brown was at the gym on the treadmill when he got the call that Aimee was in labor. Within minutes, he was in the delivery room. Now his hauntingly beautiful black-and-white portraits fill in the gaps of Aimee's family photo album and her memory.

"It's such a joyous and sad occasion," Brown says. "It's hard to stay detached, but you know that these are pictures that have to last a lifetime. It's a family history and the only portraits they'll ever have."

But Sophie's legacy will amount to more than photographs and memories. Like Corie's son, Larson, Sophie's life will have purpose. Her mother's grief and experience will have a purpose.

Working closely with O'Brien and Laura Huene to form String of Pearls, Aimee will provide guidance, strength and support for women who have chosen to bring their terminal pregnancies to term.

Huene, who is also a labor-and-delivery nurse, understands the pain and isolation that comes with losing a child. Her daughter, Pearl, was diagnosed with Trisomy 13 nearly two years ago and died within hours after she was born.

"How many people can say that they have held a piece of heaven in their arms?" Huene says. "Pearl was not created to live on Earth, yet we were given time with her and in those moments we saw the face of God."

Though still in the genesis stage and with a Web site in the works, String of Peals will be a resource for families by providing a variety of services including: Suggestions for a birth plan, funeral arrangements, a liaison between the medical communities, referrals to support groups, assistance in creating keepsakes, coordination with Hospice and local pastors, as well as contacting photographers such as Jerrod Brown — all at no cost to the parents.

"We want people to know that while you may never move on, you can move forward," Aimee says. "Every moment is precious. This has changed us all ... we are not the same people as before Sophie came into our lives.

"We are better because of the nine minutes she gave us."

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