

Mom shows her gratitude on stage

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Thank-you cards just couldn't convey the depth of gratitude Alisa Walton felt for the doctors and nurses at St. Joseph's Health Centre, whose quick thinking and expertise saved her newborn son.

Walton's son David James, or D.J. as he's affectionately called, was born with Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension of the Newborn (PPHN), which occurs when a newborn's circulation system does not adapt to breathing outside the womb. Following a difficult pregnancy, Walton went into labour in her eighth month. D.J. was born by C-section in the early morning hours of Dec. 19, 2007.

"The baby gasped once and then I didn't hear anything," Walton said in an entry on her blog.

In fact, she recalled, no one was saying anything, except her husband, who reassured her that the baby was fine, "nice and pink." Although, the operating room doctors and nurses' "stiff" and "focused" faces said otherwise.

Walton caught a quick glimpse of her son before he was whisked away. The health centre's team intubated him and stabilized him before he was transferred to The Hospital for Sick Children.

"It's a pretty grave situation," said Walton in an interview Tuesday afternoon. "The neo-natal team at St. Joe's acted quickly, putting the baby on life support, sedating him to keep him resting."

Jennifer Torode, patient care manager of the NICU, said less than two percent of term babies are born with PPHN.

"There's always a danger, a possibility of it happening in the early stages," she said. "It can get better or it can get worse. It's one of the most complex conditions."

In some cases, the damage is permanent, Torode added.

"In today's more advanced technical world we have a lot more successes than we do failures. We're trained carefully to recognize the signs and symptoms," she said.

D.J. spent eight days at Sick Kids Hospital and 18 days at St. Joe's. If a baby heals, there is usually no long term affects, said Walton.

"He's perfect," she said of her now two-year-old son.

The Long Branch area resident said she wrote countless thank-you cards recounting the family's ordeal, but she thought they didn't seem enough. The health centre's nurses were so sensitive and loving and offered plenty of hugs and words of encouragement, said Walton.

"I thought I'd give back the only way I could: I'd do a show," said the 20-year veteran of physical theatre performance.



Mom shows her gratitude on stage. Alisa Walton, right, rehearses a clowning version of Les Sylphides with Lisa Brkich at Brave Body Pilates Inc. Tuesday afternoon. The two are part of a cast of physical theatre performers featured in '25 Days', a benefit for St. Joe's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit on Feb. 19 at the Assembly Hall in Etobicoke. *Staff photo/ANICE WONG*

Walton, alongside some of the city's most talented and experienced dance, theatre and circus performers, presents '25 Days,' a benefit concert for St. Joseph's Health Centre's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, Feb. 19 at The Assembly Hall. The series of short acrobatic, juggling, clown and dance pieces is named for the number of days her son spent in hospital. Amid the circus, modern dance and ballet performances, '25 Days' will tell the stories of children whose lives have been saved by the health centre's neonatal team.

"We have actors reading mothers' and fathers' stories," said Walton. "They're heart-wrenching."

The benefit showcases performers between the ages of 40 and 58 (they may not be doing double-back handsprings, but there will be a split or two, quipped Walton).

"I'd like for the audience to see there's lots of beauty in older bodies. We're hoping people will take some pleasure in it while having a nice night out," she said.

Walton rehearsed with long-time friend and fellow performer Stephen La Frenie at her Pilates studio, Brave Body, on Lake Shore Boulevard at Tenth Street, Jan. 12. Walton first met La Frenie when they co-starred in the popular children's series 'Elliot Moose is on the Loose.'

"It's a great idea, a good story," said La Frenie, who didn't hesitate to be a part of '25 Days.' "The show is very professional, very enjoyable. It was fun to put the nose back on. I hadn't clowned for 10 years."

Walton wants to raise not only funds, but awareness of PPHN and the significant work that St. Joe's neonatal intensive care team does. '25 Days' starts at 8 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Assembly Hall, 1 Colonel Samuel Smith Park Drive. VIP tickets and reception: \$60; general admission: \$30. For tickets, visit www.brownpapertickets.com or call 1-800-838-3006 (press 1).

For further info, log onto <http://crowsfeetphysicaltheatre.blogspot.com/>

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