

New Baby Swenby # 4  
4 weeks – April 30, 2007

The week before I found out I was actually expecting, I suspected something was different. Other than the obvious signs, I noticed how hungry I had been during the past week. I could not find food to satisfy me! I could eat all day and night and I needed junk! I also noticed that in the morning about 5 a.m. or 6 I'd wake up to the uncontrollable urge to pee! Another sure fire sign for me! I did take two tests that week, but they were negative. I suspected they would be negative as it was early.

On April 30, 2007, I bought a test and two pink lines appeared. Just as the lines appeared, multiple emotions ran up and down my spine. How would I finish school? How will we pay child care? Ally is only 11 month's old! And mostly, what will people say? Along with the initial concerns – thoughts ran through my mind about weight gain, hemorrhoids, labor pains, doctor visits and finding babysitters. We had also just bought a puppy and placed a deposit on a dog! How could I do it all?

Reality slowly began to set in and it didn't take long for me to realize that that a person can never, ever go wrong with a new baby. God's plan is always better than my plan and although I needed to reroute my train of thought, God always knows what best for me and has never given me anything that I can't handle. Shortly after the initial shock, I prayed and accepted God's challenge and thanked Him for such a huge, unexpected blessing!

I called Aaron and shared with him what I had just found out – I could actually hear his smile! Of all the kids, he was most excited about this one. Was it because I had firmly said I was done having babies and his heart wanted more? Who knows, but Aaron was truly joyful with not one concern, except for me.

After I began to sort my feelings and ran down each of my concerns made a list and began to solve each situation. I realized this was the best thing, and was glad God was in charge!

- I would finish school. The baby was expected January 7<sup>th</sup>, right at winter break. It was a perfect time to have a baby and Aaron would be home more to help.
- Lexi would be in kindergarten, child care would be no different except during the summer months.
- Although Ally will only be 1 \_ years old – she will still be taking a nap during the day. Aubree and Ally should be better playmates by then and if not Ally will be a big sister who will have a sibling that will be close enough in age to nearly be called her twin!
- I will accept the pregnancy and just adjust. I will accept the hemorrhoids, weight gain and everything else, because it is always worth it!

April 30, 2007 – May 30, 2007 – 8 weeks

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, just three days after I found out I was expecting, I had to tell someone. I shared the news with your Auntie Tammy. I had to begin to find out how people would react. Would they be happy or would they be concerned. I knew the people who knew my schedule now with work, school and three kids, would probably be concerned. I was most afraid of sarcastic reactions (I know what your thinking, but believe it or not, some people think it's their issue) I made my sister promise to be positive about the secret I was about to tell her – and she was! She was very surprised, but helped me to sort out my concerns as well. It was helpful and I was glad I was able to have someone I trusted my feelings with to share such great news.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, Aaron got home from work for the week and could hardly stand it. He needed to share his excitement with his parents. We drove to their house and told them about the 4<sup>th</sup> child. I remember noticing how Willard's face lit up.

On Mother's Day weekend (May 13, 2007), we told the rest of our families – Grandma Bonnie & Grandpa Mel, Grandma Caroline, Uncle John, Nikki & Duane, Darren & Jody, and Auntie Angie. People were very surprised and happy for us, although the usual and dreaded comment appeared about how they felt we needed a boy. Why can't people just insist and pray and comment for a healthy baby!

During the month, I noticed that I had a huge appetite increase, along with about a 6 lb. Weight increase. How devastating for me! I just couldn't help it, I was so hungry! Things seem to be subsiding a bit now, thank God. Heartburn has already set in and the jeans are already a little tight. I guess you have to have a little rain before the sun!

I will be glad to hear your heartbeat next month. I will be able to verify that all is healthy and that there is only one baby!!!

June 1, 2007 – June 25, 2007 – 12 weeks

Finally, the daily nausea ending at about 10 –11 weeks! It was beginning to be a daily thing that came in waves – making me want to throw up, but unable to. Thankfully, it was short lived and the episodes didn't last for more than 20 minutes at a time. Mostly, I think it was just my body's way of telling me to take a rest and eat a little something. Thank God for saltines!

On June 26, 2007, I heard your heartbeat for the first time. Your hear beat at 150-160 beats per minute. This was my indication of accepting you as a permanent fixture in our family. After a miscarriage, I found myself with Ally and with you, cautiously proceeding until I could hear that heartbeat for the first time. Although there is a still a risk, I feel like I can let my heart be attached.

I really looked forward to this dr. appointment. It's always such a comfort to get that initial appointment out of the way and begin our journey.

June 26, 2007 – July 22, 2007 – 12 - 16 weeks

Time has flown by and it is not standing still like I had hoped it would!

Another Dr. appointment was held on July 19. Dr. Kanten reported a strong heartbeat at 160 beats per minute. At first he indicated I was measuring large, but he quickly took that back stating I was right on where I should be at 16 weeks. I weighed 176 already at my appointment! That was quite devastating; however I shouldn't have been surprised since I had to break out the maternity clothes last week already. I remember hitting the maternity clothes at 20 weeks with Ally, not at 15!

I began to get a bit excited rather than overwhelmed this month. I think I have found some names (after some e-mail help) Everyone concurs that we need to stay with the "A's". I have really grown fond of Annie for a girl and after hearing that name, I could see myself with 4 girls. If God gives us a boy, I had always had my heart set on Jacob, but lately my heart has been leaning towards Austin. For some reason the boy names roll off my tongue and the girl names do not come so easily. Is God preparing me for a boy?

I think more often than not that I may be carrying a boy. With the girls, I knew from day 1 that they would be girls, and with this pregnancy, I do not feel that! I honestly have no idea what I have inside me. I keep waiting for that dream, but it hasn't happened yet. Maybe it's because this time I honestly do not care! I do not feel the need to control this area this time. I feel that I would love to have 4 girls; but I also recognize that this pregnancy was not planned, and we are doing great – I bet an unplanned boy would be just as easily adjusted to. Anyway....my mind is not closed to the idea of a boy like it was in the past. It is truly a warm feeling just relaxing about it. I wish I would have taken that route before. It is much more enjoyable.

I lay each night waiting for movement and this week (at the start of 16 weeks) I thought I felt what resembled movement but it was so minor, I could not be sure. Each night I keep waiting for that first kick and actually am looking forward to that feeling once again.

July 22, 2007 – August 19, 2007 – 20 weeks

Well – we've reached the halfway mark clear of stress, until the ultra sound on August 16, 2007.

Our baby was diagnosed with Anencephaly. This, from what I hear, is not as uncommon as you think, but we'll find that out later. It is a neural tubal defect in the same category as spina bifida, however, this affects the front part of the brain in most cases and there is always a 100% fatality rate at birth. No baby can live without the brain. Basically, from the information I have gathered when I was 4 weeks along, on a healthy baby the skull and membranes form around the brain - which then protect the brain. In this case, that did not happen so what was forming and trying to develop is not protected from the amniotic fluid. They have assured me that this baby cannot feel any pain on the exposure of the openness. I was told that even brain surgery patients cannot feel actual touching of their brain during the surgery as there are no nerve endings in the brain. This baby is lacking any compatibility of life the we live. It cannot survive without me.

Over the years, we have had many ultrasounds - this is my 5th pregnancy, so we have developed a small relationship with the ex-ray technician in Crookston, and within minutes we could tell something was not right. All she could tell us is that we need to see a dr. right away and knew Dr. Kanten was out of town. After about an hour of waiting, Kanten's replacement sat down and told us that this baby is not viable and will not survive. He said we needed to go to a different hospital to induce labor and delivery and the baby will be born dead. Crookston could not perform this because of the high risk of bleeding. The first this I told him is "I can't kill my baby!" Immediate devastation and terror filled my mind and I cried uncontrollably on Aaron's shoulder.

We have thought long and hard the last few days. If I had no conscience at all, I'd choose to end this pregnancy now...especially if I listened to the words of the dr. "not viable". I would love to be done right now and begin to move on. Our thoughts were, could we live with that decision? I knew if I just waited the course, I'd have no regrets. Our heart of hearts found it difficult to part with this baby on our terms. I had told Aaron, what if we do this and I go to heaven and my baby says "Mom, why didn't you keep me with you as long as you could? I wanted you, and I needed you?" I know there's no hope at all for this child to live in our world, but I couldn't just look at the medical point. Some researchers feel it is less traumatic on the mother if the pregnancy is eliminated, but recent indications are revealing that there is no difference and sometimes the trauma is worse at early removal. It was clear...Labor, Delivery and Death are inevitable, the question is when? At some point induction will occur. This baby does not have the brain capacity to induce labor on it's own and is completely comfortable in being inside me forever, which isn't safe for me.

Father Bob Schreiner of Crookston has spent much time with us and has helped us make our decision clear and one we will be able to be proud of when it is over. Father Bob has studied ethical medicine for years and has actually walked this path with many parents. He said that the church, in this circumstance, feels that at 33 weeks would be a proper

benchmark to induce labor and delivery. The reason for this is that any healthy baby will survive a delivery at 33 weeks, anything prior is not likely and very risky for death. The church feels that this baby is meant to die from Anencephaly. Anything prior to 33 weeks would be a different cause of death. At 33 weeks, the risk of carrying this baby increases for me, which is also another reason for that benchmark. Oh how we cried. This is not what we wanted to hear, although it is still better than 40 weeks!

I told him how I felt and that I was praying for God to take this baby to heaven now, at his will. He shared that even Jesus pleaded with God for a different way before he died and Jesus had the free will to walk away, but he chose not to. He felt that we were chosen by God to bear this cross and in God's eyes, this baby is nothing less than perfect. He disagreed with the Dr. we saw and said that right now, this baby is viable. It is completely alive and with a soul but just imperfect from a medical science standpoint. He also used the example that even Mary knew her baby was born to die, just like ours. He promised that our baby will be of great things, even though we may not see it short term - maybe one day our children will come to us and say what a valuable lesson this ordeal has taught them and this is shaping their character for what they are to be faced with. The point was that we are not meant to see the bigger picture, we are supposed to let our faith guide us. At this point, it is not what is best for us, it is what is best for this baby and this baby is viable inside me. At 33 weeks, it is possible, depending on the brainstem that should be baby not be stillborn, I will be able to nurse the baby because the brainstem will create involuntary sucking. The baby could squeeze our hand and maybe cry. Some babies can live for a few days, but most die within a couple of hours, completely painless.

So to us, although seemingly difficult, we will go to at least 33 weeks and have an ultra sound again to determine the probability of any hour of bonding. This is to say that no other problems arise. I will be monitored closely to be sure that the excess amniotic fluid does not cause a uterine rupture or other risk factors. But as it stands with the information we have, we will deliver around mid November, depending on what the ultra sound in the cities reads. I could even deliver in Crookston and be close to our family and friends with our other children's doctor, if he's willing. Father Bob was elated that we have Dr. Kanten for our Dr. and felt he was one of the best choices for a difficult situation as this.

Father Bob also helped us through the family dynamics that will take place and how we should handle the children we do have. He said that when the baby is born and if it is alive he would suggest not letting the children meet him/her. It is too much for them and we would have a responsibility to then deal with their issues first and setting ours aside. He felt that will be a time just for us; however, at the service (which will be a closed casket due to the impossibility of embalming), it is a great time for Lexi to see how much her dad loves her mom and just lay the footwork for her mind to know what it means to have each other and set the example for her future. After describing Aubree, he felt that it would be best to not involve her at all and her mind was not ready for any of it. He suggested though, drawing pictures for baby for a scrapbook for them to review later about their brother/sister. This baby should never be forgotten and should always be

apart of our family and should be treated no other way. Lexi says that our baby is very sick and will going to heaven when it is time, which is what we have told her and that all she really needs to know. Aubree doesn't even realize the effects, She said she is just going to pray for another so I can stop crying! Father Bob suggested enjoying this baby as a family and involving them as much as we can. Let the kids feel the kicks, pick out the names, hug my belly - do it all the same as we would anyway. The baby has natural reflex so it will kick back and already has when we push on it.

Within the next week, we will go to the U of M to have a 3 - D ultra sound to determine the sex to determine the stage of the brain stem, Genetic Physician and Counseling (to determine the cause and the probability of this reoccurring to us or our children's children). They will coordinate with Crookston if Dr. Kanten is willing, to determine the proper steps to proceed. Lexi is very persistent that she see this baby, (which is not advised) so I am thinking that depending on the severity of the visual aspect (from what I have seen, some images are not pretty) She could look at the 3-d pictures of the face.

It is so funny how from the beginning of this pregnancy I could just not adjust. At least once a week prior to this ordeal Aaron and I would talk about how I just was having such a difficult time bonding with this baby. After being so far along I felt that I should have been well adjusted to the fact that we were having another baby. I'd go to bed and wait for dreams to happen, but they'd never come. It was so different than my other pregnancies, even the one I miscarried, I had dreams! I have dreams about other people's babies, but not mine. I think down deep a mom just knows but is too afraid to say the worst. After this closure received from Father Bob and making decision to proceed, I finally had a dream! This baby was girl with tons of brown curly hair (she was about 6 months in the dream) She had a weeping cut all around her head and the sparkle in her eye was missing. You could tell that she could feel that I loved her and she loved me, but that was all she could feel. This dream was so very vivid. Her eyes were identical to Allyson's and her face shape was just like Aubree's - her mouth was a spitting image of my neice Grace. We were at home and Aaron handed her to me and we both thought she was absolutely perfect. I told him that I wanted to nurse before she went - and she bit me, but she did die while she was nursing. But we were all at peace and it was okay. What a great dream, though, and finally well awaited and deserved.

August 19, 2007 – August 26, 2007 – 21 weeks

I am going to journal more often – as the life we have right now is all we will get with our baby and I want to remember everything I can and have a guide for our current children as they grow up and have babies of their own. I don't want to ever experience this again, but I certainly don't want to forget a thing.

This past week has been truly the most difficult one I have ever experienced. I can go to tears in no time just thinking of my sadness – although it is getting better as time goes.

On August 18, 2007, we found out that our baby is a boy! I called Sylvia Martin, our ultra sound technician and she told me that we had a son! Lexi immediately named him Austin and later that week Aaron and I decided on John for a middle name and a wonderful namesake (Uncle John, Grandpa Melvin John, Great Grandpa John Ellision, and Great Grandpa John Bohnenkamp). What an adjustment, knowing what we are having. Tears of sadness just thinking of all the things we weren't going to be able to do and have from this little one.

On August 21 – We didn't find out much at the U of M that we didn't already know. Austin clearly has Anencephaly. We first had our Ultra Sound - which I don't think I would be ever ready to do again. Those machines are truly amazing and have so much detail. We first viewed things black and white, which really didn't show us anything that we hadn't already seen in Crookston - most of it was pretty Greek to us, but when she showed us 3-d, I had to turn my head. It was really important to Aaron that he see. They paused a few still pictures for me and one was with his eyes looking directly into mine. I will never forget that image and I immediately turned away to tears. Even I could see that there was no way for Austin to be apart of our world. The doctors and us too, felt it was good for us to see him ahead of time and prepare us for what he will look like. I am glad I had a little preparation, but it was too much to bear for me right now. They were however, able to print us some beautiful side profile shots of him to bring home to the girls and for his scrapbook. He looks an awful lot like Aaron from the side and I think when he is born, his facial features will look like the Swenby's. He was pretty excited - seems like having girls, most people say they resemble me with Blonde hair - so hearing (and I think he could see it too) that his son may resemble him, melted his heart.

The doctor visited with us and confirmed the diagnosis. He answered our questions - which we didn't have very many anymore. He was able to speak to Dr. Kanten and we are fortunate that we can deliver this baby in Crookston close to our family and friends and with a dr. we trust and who supports our decision. The mpls. dr. commented on our great choice of a dr. and felt very comfortable leaving us in his hands (which we already knew). The dr. believed the 33 weeks is a good time for baby and for us to deliver the baby and from what we have been reading too soon isn't good for him as suctioning would be possible and he is only 1 lb. right now! Too late isn't good either because the shoulders are too wide to complete the task through the birth canal and difficulties can arise there too. I really wanted to know what the chances were for a live birth vs. stillborn, vs. premature delivery. The chances of premature spontaneous delivery are

very slim (sadly, I was hoping for this as I never, ever, want to have to make the decision to be induced for this reason. I am petrified of authorizing the death of my baby, even at 33 weeks) This baby does not have the brain activity to be born. My body would have to reject him. After what little look they could get at the brain stem, a live birth is not as likely as other anencephalic babies - pretty shy of too much near the back stem. He prepared us to give birth to a still baby at our goal of 33 weeks.

We then spoke to a Genetic Counselor/Physician. Aaron got more out of this conversation than I did (Biology isn't my area). Basically, they can't tell us anything until they do an autopsy on the placenta. This will tell them if Chromosomes played a part in the anencephaly. They will be looking for an additional or lacking chromosome - which is similar to downs syndrome. Basically just a fluke thing that happens. They do not, however, think this is what it was caused from. They will then be looking for a transverse set of chromosomes - which is highly rare - and if this is the cause, our chances of having this happen again significantly increase - possibly up to 50%. Either way it is a formality to have this examined and it must be done. They do not feel that chromosomes played a part in this at all. After taking a detailed family history of both Aaron and I, they feel it is probably a combination of environmental factors and genetic flukes - basically this is just an unexplainable event - a fluke or an accident when worlds collided. Every pregnancy has a 3-4% risk for birth defects no matter what. Our chances will increase by an additional 1%. So the chances of this happening again are about 5% - leaving us a 95% chance at another healthy pregnancy - if we are ever brave enough. The 5% chance is also there for our girls when they have children (which is what we really wanted to find out for their sake). The chance is greatly reduced if I take folic acid. As soon as this baby is born, I will be prescribed large doses of Folic acid until I am menopausal - just incase of an oops. When our girls reach child bearing age, they will also be prescribed to the same dose of folic acid. They really stressed the folic acid issue - In fact for women - they suggest all women take folic acid - just incase of that oops baby. Especially if you have a history of a miscarriage - apparently your chances are greater for birth defects.

So now it's just the wait and see game. From here on out, we meet with Dr. Kanten just like we would any other pregnancy. We have prenatal hospice helping us write a birth plan.

We met with Dr. Kanten for the first time after the news on August 23, 2007. and he was genuinely devastated for us. His heart broke along with ours, but not once did he make us feel that we were not making the right decision. We felt his support 100% and knew he was the right dr. for us. We went over the everything we already knew and he told us that he would like to see me every 2 weeks and if I need to, he's willing to see me whenever to check fetal heart tones.

For now, Austin is safe, happy, and well taken care of. We are just praying for the best for him and we tell God every day that we are okay if he wants to give him his wings now. We will be obedient and wait until the time is right, but we can still ask for what

we think we want, right??? I have gone from pleading and begging God to take him and now I have just accepted the fact that I will be pregnant for a while.

August 26, 2007 – September 3, 2007 – 22 weeks

I have been feeling a lot of outside pressure to donate my baby's organs. As of now, I am so far closed to the idea and am actually very angry at inconsiderate people's implied suggestions. I know it is selfish of me, but if I have 5 minutes with my baby, he will die in my arms, not on a stranger's table!

I was feeling a lot less movement this week than last week – and I knew I was probably just paranoid, but I had the heart tones checked this week. The heartbeat sounded faint to me, but was there. His kicks feel much like a gas bubble to me right now and sometimes it's so hard to tell the difference. I know with the girls, I could visually see their movement at this stage so Austin's kicks are far less intense.

As far as other pregnancy symptoms, I have heartburn when I lay down at night and two tums seem to do the trick just perfectly. His kicks are low – lower than what I remember with the girls. They seemed to set up camp under my ribs, and Austin, although subtle, his movements are very low. In fact, sometimes I feel so much lower pressure it feels as though my insides are about to cave. With this pregnancy I have a lot of cramping and have noticed that for just over a month. With every little cramp, I always think that maybe this will be the end of our path together, but so far, all has held true.

I am busy thinking of how I want this all to go and how to make a bad situation better. The church has given Austin a prayer blanket that I wrap my tummy in each night. When he is born, I plan to have him wrapped in that. He will need a hat and his head will be much smaller than a preemie, so I have asked Nikki to knit me one – she said she'd try as she's never done round before, but she will ask around to her knitting friends for some direction. I have asked Great Grandma Caroline to make a small blanket compiled of the girls' baby blankets for him to be buried with and with a tearful eye she assured us that we could count on her. My Aunt Vivian, who also had an infant pass, would like to make Austin a baptism blanket which we joyfully accepted. I feel that any keepsakes we have of him the more I will have to remember our short journey together. I know that I want his footprints and I'd like to have a mold of his hand and if he has hair, I intend to cut a sample for his scrapbook. I want to get all I can get to hold close to my heart.

I have many dreams about my fears of labor and delivery and what I will go through. The only thing that is keeping me from losing my mind in anticipation is knowing that Austin is safe and he is truly happy right now. I am so afraid that if God doesn't do this for me, will I ever be able to make the decision to let him go? Knowing that he is content and in my heart I know he can feel that I love him, how can I choose to let him go? I pray that God will make this decision for me. I feel so torn. My 3 girls need me here – but I feel that Austin needs me too! I hope that when the day comes, it is clear to me, but for now, I am just taking one day at a time. I can't say that I am enjoying this pregnancy at all – but I am coping and we are getting by.

God will do whatever is best for Austin and I pray that whatever that answer is, he can heal our hearts and bring us peace in the process. If I know that he is safe and happy and that God is holding his hands, we can do anything! I have gone from angry, to sad, to isolation – all in a matter of two weeks! I think now I am just learning to accept the fact that this baby will not live with me and I now have a very important job of turning my life around to ensure a spot in Heaven next to my baby. I am still very terrified of my future – labor, delivery, and watching my baby die – but we are floating on faith and thank God for that.

September 4, 2007 – September 11, 2007 – 23 weeks

Not much has changed in my thoughts. I still stand where I stand and pray what I pray. I have found myself being very excited to hold him and see him. I am actually looking forward to meeting him and am not as fearful of what I will see and feel.

I believe that I will not have to wait the 33 weeks to meet him. I am experiencing lots of pelvic, abdominal, and vaginal pressure. I do not know how long we have, but I know it will come soon. I did not experience these symptoms so consistently until about 3 weeks before delivery with Ally. The only difference is that I do not feel my abdomen tighten like I did the before and I don't know if that's because I am only 23 week gestation and there is still too much fat in the way or if I am just experiencing normal pregnancy aches. I have been experiencing this discomfort for almost a week now. I do not find myself as nervous as I thought, but I am actually relieved that his journey will begin. Right now as I type, I am experiencing fairly consistent pains at every 4-5 minutes with an intermittent low back ache. Every night I still pray for God to do what is best for Austin – but if he is in any pain at all, I beg that he take him now.

Austin has been more active this past week. His movements are stronger and more obvious. On September 8, I actually saw him move for the first time. It surprised me because I did not anticipate visually seeing him move – I did not think an anencephalic baby would have the strength for that! Most of his movements are felt very low, in between my hip bones – whereas the girls were felt under my ribs by now! I am thinking he is now feet down, and from what I hear, it is okay to deliver him feet first if he is NOT delivered at 40 weeks.

I had a dr. appointment on September 6 and Dr. Kanten said I'd only need to be seen every 4 weeks for now – unless I feel I need to see him. My weight was at 178 lbs. and the heartbeat was found and as it should be.

A birth plan has been written with help from prenatal hospice and two tiny hats have been given to me for him to wear. Nikki optimistically knitted him a hat which will clearly be too big for his tiny little head, but it touched my heart that she took the time to make him a keepsake.

The community has been absolutely wonderful in giving us the support. I have heard from many that we are making the correct decision and I actually sometimes feel like a hero! I have recently heard of someone who has terminated her pregnancy at 22 weeks due to Trisomy 13. I must admit it broke my heart! Her baby actually has a chance, a slim one, but a chance. I wondered how she felt when it was over and if she'll wonder "what if". I am thankful that I will not wonder, but I will know I have fulfilled God's plan for Austin. I can already see the amount of people he has affected and how my decision has changed other's view on the quality of life and a mother's love.

September 12, 2007 – September 17, 2007 - 24 weeks

The contractions I was feeling seemed to have subsided. They are still there and are stronger, clearly contractions; but nothing regular or of concern. Things are probably just doing their job a little earlier.

I have come across many new thoughts this week. I was watching a religious television show this past week and mom's testimony was given. Her baby was 22 weeks gestation and her bag of water broke. She went to the hospital that night and the dr. examined her and he said I am sorry, but the baby's feet are already in the birth canal and there is nothing that we can do. At 22 weeks she was told that they would provide only comfort measures for the baby and she will die, if born alive. She was devastated and prayed the whole night. The next morning, the dr. did a final ultrasound (I am assuming because he could not feel the baby in the birth canal anymore) Amazingly, the women's bag of water was restored and the baby was positioned head down, away from the birth canal. She miraculously delivered at 40 weeks. The dr. indicated that a bag of water restoring itself is nearly unheard of. This women testifies her miracle.

At that point, I realized that I had given up all hope for our baby! Why hadn't I thought of the real possibility of a miracle for our baby. I did some biblical research on miracles and had many questions on how to obtain one. I have discovered that all I have to ask in Jesus' name and it shall be done. Of course it is more complex than just asking – but we do believe that Jesus can give us this miracle. He can knit Austin a head and give him complete healing. I found myself wondering if that was even best for Austin. I truly do not know God's plan for him. I want this miracle more than anything. I read that I should ask God for wisdom to seek the final plan so that I know if I should pray for that miracle or not. Kind of like Jesus before he died, he sweat blood asking for another way, but God showed him the final plan and Jesus knew it was the best gift he could give. I wonder what kind of gift my baby will give. Something pretty great I am sure. I have sought out further spiritual advice and information on miracles from Father Bob. I also read that the receive one, a person has to actually believe wholeheartedly that what they have asked for has been done. I struggled with that because I feel like I have come so far in the last 4 weeks, that I may be setting myself up for a miracle that isn't His plan. I asked my mom what she thought and she assured me that Austin's circumstance will give us a miracle as Jesus promises, but it just may not be the one we are asking for. I admit I have bargained with God. I have promised to be His biggest prolife spokesperson if he'd grant me this one wish. I have searched the internet in anencephaly miracles and have not found any! Not ever have I been able to find a misdiagnosis or an unexplained anencephaly miracle! I have begged him to let me be the first to prove my drs. wrong. (especially the first dr. we saw who made me feel like the life I was carrying was worthless!)

Lately, I have not felt the overwhelming urge to not be pregnant. When I look at how I felt when we first heard the news and compare it to now, I can't even recognize the person's feelings 4 weeks ago. I am ashamed to say that I wanted so badly for this pregnancy to be over. What I wanted was for my heartache and terrified feelings to be

over. Now, I just want to be okay. The terrified feelings I have of labor, delivery and seeing my baby for the first time are dissipating. I am starting to feel proud. I have a son! I have 3 girls and 1 boy! I feel that I can't wait to get my hands on him and to touch him skin to skin – cheek to cheek. I can't wait to whisper in his ear that I love him. Simply amazing and sad that these feelings didn't enter my mind before. Honestly, they really didn't enter in my mind with my healthy children. All I wanted was to not be pregnant anymore! Oh what I took for granted! Knowing all of the things I won't get to do with him, makes me think of the most important things I will do when I hold him for the first and last time. If God took this burden from me today, I'd be okay and love that baby up. If God took this burden from me at 33 weeks or 40, that'd be okay too and I'd love that baby up! With everything I've been shown in the last 4 weeks, I wonder what else I will be shown in the next 10? I can't say that I'm thrilled about being pregnant right now – but I wasn't thrilled with my other 3 either! Come on, who likes to be pregnant!!! It's even more heart wrenching when I know I'm not going to get what I signed up for! I have some days when I am more down than others and feel more sorry for myself. The testimony of a mom who got her miracle got me through this week. The strong contractions indicating that my journey would soon be over and that I could begin to pick up the pieces got me through last week. I wonder what will get me through the weeks to come?

Many people ask me how Aaron is doing. I keep telling them he is doing just fine. I think it is so different for dad's. As a mommy, you feel it the minute you see two pink lines. As a dad, it is such a visual thing and their love grows as the child grows. I think a mom feels all she will ever feel for that baby the minute she's told she's pregnant. Aaron is more worried about me and the kids and I don't think he's begun to anticipate what he will feel when he holds a dying baby who resembles him. I think he will start to go through what I have been going through as soon as he holds his baby. Hopefully I can be strong enough to be what I just don't think he'll be able to be at the time. He'll be okay, but his process will start the day Austin is here. I asked Aaron if he wanted more kids and if he'd do this again. Aaron touched my heart when he said he'd do this 10 more times at the chance for another healthy child. I can't say that I am there yet, but I know he's going to be okay just by that statement.

Austin's kicks seem to be getting a bit more intense than before and they are starting to resemble my other children. He is less active, but I do not have to be sitting completely still to know his is there. He has no pattern, and no warning of his movements, but it is clear to me that it is not gas! The only difference is that he kicks me very low, in between my hip bones. I have been told that is because he is a boy (mom's with boys tell me that). Boys are lower than girls. I don't know if I'm sold on that theory, I think that it is just because he is feet first and my other's were head first!

September 17, 2007 - September 24, 2007 25 weeks

As I begin to accept this diagnosis, so many new thoughts are starting to enter my mind and I am reflecting on the chaos of first finding out the news. Some feelings of hurt and resentment enter my mind when I think of how people encouraged me to “take care of this”. At the time I appreciated their comments because it made me justify what I was truly feeling, now as I grow attached to my baby and realize how much he needs me, I am resentful and angry at those comments. I have really learned a valuable lesson – when people are hurt and come to you for support, just be there because that’s all they really need. At first when I would say to some that I wanted out and I just didn’t see carrying this baby possible or purposeful – the body language of people told me whether they thought it was the right decision or the wrong decision. I think that most people now, feel that we are making an admirable and selfless choice and when people now say how proud they are of us and how they think we are making the right choice, my heart is warmed.

As the newness of the diagnosis wears off, I am finding myself searching for people to share my journey with. It feels so good to tell someone about Austin who hasn’t heard anything about him before. The support is slowly dwindling and even family is starting to find our situation less of a conversations piece. I completely understand that, but Austin is on my mind every single second of every single day. Just because I am not curled up in a fetal position in the corner crying about it doesn’t mean I am not thinking about it!

Aaron and I have talked a bunch about Austin’s funeral and how we’d like to celebrate that day. It will be our only celebration that day and I am committed to making it as healthy as we can for our other children watching. I told Lexi how we are going to have a big party in honor of Austin entering Heaven. She was pretty excited – cake and balloons were mentioned. I think that we are going to try to make it a celebration afterwards, rather than a depressing day – we will try anyway....

I have found myself being more down this past week. The cramping I was experiencing has completely subsided which has decreased my hope in God taking Austin on his terms. I am finding myself, once again, wishing it was time, but for the wrong reasons again. I am just tired of this and I want to pick up and move on. The pregnancy symptoms themselves have not been too overwhelming, just extreme heartburn and the tight feeling your stomach gets when you want to bend over. I am considerably smaller than I was with my other pregnancies at this stage so my comfort level is holding well. My emotional level seems to be not as high spirited as it was. I really think that talking about it is so great and it makes me feel so good to start from the beginning with someone new, but those people are few and far between. The only thing that hasn’t changed in my mind is that we are indeed, making the best decision for our baby. I am just getting tired of the fight and I am finding myself impatient with my other children and irritable with existing right now. I am starting to fear labor and delivery the larger he gets. I find myself asking, what is God waiting for? How much more does he want me to learn? I really hope that as I reflect on this whole experience, that I do not regret my feelings of

wanting to be finished with this pregnancy. It isn't that I don't want my baby, because I do with my whole heart, but I just don't want to bear this cross of fear and anticipation any longer.

On a more positive note though, Austin is probably our most active baby! Who'd have thought? He was off to such a slow start, but his movements are not as strong, but definitely more often. The only difference I can for surely say is that with the others I could tell when they were about to move, and with Austin's movements there is no warning. That will probably get better too. Lexi was able to feel him move this week and she seems to get a kick out of it. Aubree is much to impatient to wait for him to move. Aubree spends most of her time covering up my belly with blankets to keep him warm and each day she asks "How's that baby doing?". She is always consistent with giving him (my belly) a hug and a kiss that day. Lexi has been so inquisitive about death and the whole process and I am so thankful that she asks such detailed questions. The answers always seem to come to me and I always feel satisfied with what I have told her. I think she will come out of this with a healthy view of death, the quality of life, and love.

September 25, 2007 – October 9, 2007 - 27 weeks

These past two weeks have been the most difficult for me throughout this whole ordeal, especially this past week. I have been down and completely saddened. I can't pinpoint what the problem is, but I have no choice but to blame it on Austin's condition – it's the only logical explanation for my sadness and irritability. I am completely on edge with my other children and the last two days the tears just fall. Ashamed, I admit I have found myself pleading with God to take this burden from me. I am tired and I am tired of this. I feel like my body just can't take any more. The pregnancy symptoms are rearing their ugly head and I am more uncomfortable and I feel like I am doing this all for nothing in return or at least what I want in return. I have extreme heartburn, I am out of breath and I am so fatigued – today I took a 3 hour nap and woke just wanted to go back to bed and sleep more. I have scheduled an appointment with Dr. Kanten to rule out medical issues for the fatigue (low iron, high blood pressure, etc.) I just can't shake the yearning to be done with this, stop anticipating what's to come and begin to grieve. God is really teaching me patience, I guess, but I am finding myself in an utter hole of depression in the mean time!

As far as Austin goes, he seems to be thriving and doing well. I must say of all my children, his movements are the strongest and most often, which completely surprised me. I feel him move all the time, but Aaron does not have that opportunity as it is still difficult to determine a pattern.

I am seeing the sweet and more sensitive side of Aubree. Not a day goes by where she does not ask about Baby Austin and how he is doing. She spends much of her time covering him up with blankets and insists that he is cold. She is very worried about him and each day she says to my belly, "I love you Baby Austin", with that scratchy little voice of hers. I so hope he can hear her! We all love him so very much and beg for things to be different.

I think I am more down because I have given up the hope for a miracle. I have spent many hours reflecting and praying for just that and I think that God has changed my mind, I know in my heart it's not His plan. Clinging to that miracle was my only hope. Now I am back to the only hope of God choosing to induce this labor for me. I am so afraid that 33 weeks will come and I will be faced with this decision, knowing how desperately I want to be done, but also knowing that I just can't do it! Thirty-three weeks puts us at November 18<sup>th</sup>, the week of Thanksgiving. I am so afraid of labor, delivery, having Austin be born still and having him born live, and having to give my baby to the funeral director and leaving that hospital without my baby. I just want to do this now so I can stop torturing myself with all of the unknowns.

I feel like I am just existing right now and that I am not really living. I have a horrible attitude about life and my family and it is so unfair to my children. I feel like I am world's worst mother to them right now. I am angry, tired, bitter, and I just want to be left alone. I am not finding any enjoyment out of the good things in my life and I am so sad about that. I love my three girls with my whole heart and soul, but for some reason I

am just not in a position to be a good mother to them right now. There used to not be a day that went by where they wouldn't make me smile or laugh and now their noise just gets under my skin. They seem to sense that I am not right with the world right now and all they know how to do is tattle, complain, whine and make a mess! I am praying for a new attitude, just because my kids need me right now and because I can't stand the person I am right now. I am in a rut and I want out of it.

October 10, 2007 – October 18, 2007 – 28 + weeks

I had a dr. appointment this past week and sadly, we discussed the “doom day”. We had tentatively set the date for November 23 – the day after Thanksgiving – just because I would hopefully be able to get help with the kids because there wouldn’t be any school. This puts me close to 34 weeks. After rethinking that, I might just ask Dr. Kanten if we could go Monday - November 19<sup>th</sup>. One day after 33 weeks. The weekend after Thanksgiving is a Watershed Retreat at a spa/motel. I think a small vacation may do us some good – real good. My other option will be to wait until after the watershed retreat, putting Austin’s birthday in December. I am still praying for God to take this burden of decision from me. How can any mom make this decision, especially after this much time? In a way I do not feel like Austin is my baby. I feel like he is God’s baby and that God really should make this decision. I guess I am fearing that I am making the decision to be done at 33 weeks just to suit myself. I want to be done and because the church feels my obligation has been met, I can be with good conscious. I just don’t think I will feel “good conscious”. It’d be different if the medical team felt it was best for Austin, but there is nothing that anyone can tell me that way. The closer the date has come, the more I am down and depressed, just thinking of what I have to choose. I know that I can clearly say, I want to be done being pregnant – not only for me, but for my kids, and I just want to hold my baby. I want to kiss my baby. I want to move forward with my life. I feel I am at utter standstill in a depressive state just awaiting the worst. How grim?!

I had some other bittersweet news from my dr. at the U of M. I inquired about the folic acid dosage needed after Austin is born. We began to talk and after finding out my last two years schedule of pregnancies and nursing, Dr. Ramin said that although there is nothing that I could have done, I was probably nutritionally deficient. He said that in between babies, your body needs time to go out with the old and in the with new. Between the miscarriage and Ally there was hardly 3 months. I nursed Ally for about 8-9 months and there was only a strong 2 months in between nursing Ally and Austin’s conception. I was sad to think that only one more month could have made the difference of life and death for Austin, but I was also glad to hear that future children may be okay if we choose too. I just need to have my folic acid level tested before we’d plan on more. My children need to consider their levels before they have children as well.

I had a heartwarming dream last night, although a little confusing. Austin turned out to be a girl! Her head was all in tact and just had a little chafing on her forehead which disappeared as the dream when on. She had a ton of dark black hair and she was petite and beautiful. She’d smile at both of us and she was at home with us. I told Aaron we’d better let Minneapolis know that they misdiagnosed her for boy! We were nervous as to when her passing would be because she didn’t look anencephalic and she was happy and cognitive only she wasn’t eating, but didn’t cry for food. Just before I woke, she smiled at me and I told whoever was standing next to me that’d I’d do it all over again just for that one smile.

What a tough dream though. Oh to hold a healthy baby is such a miracle in itself and a wonder that it ever happens. The thought of having more children has really crossed my

mind and I am thinking that I may like to try again. I am so afraid, though. I think that's part of the reason I want Austin to be born, too. I have all these unanswered questions in my mind about my future and it makes me feel out of control. I can't even begin to think about my future, even something as little as taking a small family trip, because I feel like I am waiting for this crisis to be over and it is wearing me down. I feel trapped in every part of my life and looking ahead to anything positive seems out of reach.

I am starting to not feel so good lately. Periodically nauseous. I am constantly tired and very irritable and that seems to be getting much worse as the weeks go by. I finally called Dr. Kanten to request heart burn medicine. I was waking every few hours, desperately searching for Tums. My abdomen feels tight all the time. I am significantly smaller this time around, but I just feel like I have no more room and I can't understand that. Austin has set up camp permanently under my right rib (just like Lexi and Aubree did). His kicks are so much stronger and he is constantly active (which I don't really mind – Let's me know he's okay). I can count on feeling his movements several times a day.

Dr. Kanten said that Austin's heartbeat was 150 beats per minute and very strong. I was under the impression that an induction will be necessary as Austin's organs and heart are very healthy. My body is not likely to reject this pregnancy – and spontaneous labor would be a miracle all in itself.

One thing I have noticed with this pregnancy is the way that I look. To me, I am just starting to look pregnant. Before I just looked "thick". Depending on what I wear, I can still look thick vs. pregnant. Many people tell me that I look great and that I was much bigger with my others. I believe I was much bigger with the others. When I look at myself (and I am going to take a picture to remember this). Above my belly button just below my ribs I look full, but below my belly button I do not. I have an odd shaped belly. It is very firm above my belly button and very full and below there isn't much. I look kind of like an odd shaped pumpkin. This is telling me that his head is indeed down and his butt and his legs are above my belly button.

October 19, 2007 - October 29, 2007 30 weeks exactly!

These past two weeks, not only has my moral decreased, but my physical health seems to bring difficulty as well. I have found myself feeling more uncomfortable by the day. I met with Dr. Kanten this week and we discussed the possibility of polyhydramnios (excess amniotic fluid). I had researched this diagnosis prior to my appointment, and the classic symptoms (out of breath, excessive heartburn, abdominal pressure) seemed to fit me to an exact tee. He had a small, portable ultrasound machine and we both took an unexpected peak at active little Austin. He was moving so much it was difficult to get a good look and the clarity wasn't top notch. Dr. Kanten confirmed that the fluid seemed to be generous, but was unable to measure the amount so an ultra sound was scheduled for that afternoon to be sure. Dr. Kanten did say that my measurements were right at 30 weeks. Dr. Kanten also wanted to be sure that Austin's head was in position for delivery. He asked to see me again in one week to review the ultra sound results and to do a cervical check to see if anything was progressing.

The moment I had been waiting for while finally was about to come. I was going to be able to see Austin alive one more time! I had invited both of Austin's grandmas to be apart of the ultra sound to see him alive. Because Grandma Darlene was working, Grandma Bonnie was the only grandma there to share this remarkable experience.

This too was new to me too. I have never seen any baby through ultra sound at 30 weeks gestation and it truly was amazing! I was so glad my mom was able to attend with me as this final viewing of Austin so active was a happy but tearful moment that I wouldn't have wanted to do alone! To my surprise, Riverview's technology showed me many of Austin's fine details. At my request, the ultra sound technician tried to view Austin's face and head as much as she could. We were able to get such a good look we could see his eyes blink at us. That is something that I had NEVER seen and didn't even know was possible to see in an ultra sound. I really wanted to get a good look at his head and she tried real hard, but each time, he would hide behind his little hands or arch his back and put his head back so we couldn't see a clear picture. My mom and I both thought it was as if he knew what we were trying to do, but he just wasn't ready for us to see him that way. He was so very active and my mom couldn't believe that I couldn't feel all of his activity. I was so regretting how I felt when we were in Minneapolis with an opportunity to see him in 3-d. Why did I turn my head to avoid seeing him. At the time, my heart just couldn't bear to look at him and I was so afraid of what I would see. I would love to have that opportunity back now and to study him for as long as they'd let me in 3-d and get to know him a little better. I must say, it was a great blessing to share Austin's good moments with others who love him too and I am glad we chose to include the grandmas. The technician confirmed that there was "enough" fluid (but the radiologist with give us more details) and that his head was indeed down.

The ultra sound prepared me a bit for what I would see when we first meet. Austin's eyes will be "bulging". That was clear on the ultra sound – although when his eyes were shut that feature wasn't as obvious. Directly above his eyes, it is flat and it seems to taper up a bit towards the crown of his head, but not a lot. From the ultra sound. I could see

bits of Ally but it was so clear to me how his face shape would resemble Aubree. His cheek bones were higher and he has our children's famous heart shaped chin. His face is clearly round, just like the girls. My mom and I both thought his features could be described as full. The technician said that Austin weighs a whopping 3.3 oz. which was much higher than I had expected! He is definitely more full than the first time I saw him. He is getting fatter like every baby should be and is definitely thriving.

I called Father Bob again to discuss my options with the polyhydramnios; but without more details on the actual risk to me, he wasn't able to give me much. I wasn't able to get very many answers from my dr. in Minneapolis or Dr. Kanten about the actual risk. For now, it doesn't sound like there is any to me, just discomfort. In extreme cases, uterine ruptures have been noted or placental abruptions during delivery. I am assuming that being I my measurements are right on that I do not have an extreme case right now. I explained to Father Bob how the diagnosis of polyhydramnios will make a 33 week delivery easier for me. I explained how desperately I wished this fear of anticipation was gone, but I just knew I could not do it on my terms. He was compassionate. As things progress we will be in touch again. The dr. from Minneapolis did say that a common complication of polyhydramnios is that membranes rupture prematurely. Maybe this is God's way of answering my prayer for the miracle of a spontaneous delivery.

Only 3 weeks left till our imaginary benchmark date. I am really wishing all the support we had in the beginning was still available! I need it more now than I did when we first found out! As our 33 week benchmark approaches, I am feeling really alone and left with this decision facing me. Strangers are still good, they ask how we are doing. Sister Mary Jean gets to our home usually once a week and her sister writes to us often. I have a good friend who calls weekly and my mom lets me talk about him and repeat myself till I'm blue in the face. Those things are so helpful. I don't feel the support I wish I had from some family members and sometimes I actually feel that this decision has been an inconvenience for them. I don't know if it's their own demons they are facing or if they just choose to ignore the fact that this journey is really painful for me each and every day.

How desperately I want to be done, but I just know I can't. I am afraid that there is no way I will be able to induce this labor. I am petrified of it, absolutely never been more afraid in all of my life. You'd think that the death of my child or labor and delivery would be encumbering my mind, but that is not what's got me. How can I choose the date of my child's death, especially after seeing him so complete in inside me.

October 30, 2007 – November 11, 2007 – 32 weeks exactly

My emotions shifts daily. I can think of 2 –3 dark days this past week. Thursday, November 8<sup>th</sup>, was probably my darkest in a long time. I had a doctor appointment with hopes of hearing that I was a 3 cm and my fears of making a decision would be over. At my appointment, Dr. Kanten told me my body was not changing at all – nothing was happening. If this were a healthy pregnancy, that would be good news. I explained to Dr. Kanten how I was feeling and he prescribed Labatelol for my tachycardia symptoms. I was 31 weeks along and I was measuring at 33 weeks from the extra fluid, which is contributing to the way I feel. We discussed the option to induce labor on November 18 (33 weeks and 1 day). Dr. Kanten explained that because my body is not ready to give birth and is showing no signs at all of readiness, I can plan for a very long day. That news alone made me cry. Ally is only 17 months old – I clearly remember what labor is like! A long day just wasn't what I had in mind. My other option was to wait, but Dr. Kanten said that there is no guarantee that my body will ever show signs of readiness. Cesarean Section was discussed, but not necessarily recommended.

So this news left me devastated and in tears for most of the day. I began to take the weekend to research my options and read stories of other moms and their children's journeys. I found that many moms, in my situation of polyhydramnios, that their waters break prematurely, without labor. After their water broke, the instant fear for their babies set in wondering how long they could make it without the amniotic fluid. Often times, pitocin is a long process and their babies had passed by the time delivery occurred. This concerned me. I was also concerned at how much Austin could take should I decide to take the route of a long induced labor. Would his little body give out from the trauma of forcing him out? Cesarean Section seemed to be the best alternative if we were seeking a live birth as his chances greatly increase plus the issue of a difficult placental delivery was not a concern. The only negative with a C-section is the fact that I will be guaranteed 3 days in the hospital without my baby and that the recovery time is much longer. Aaron and I discussed what our goals were for Austin and we both came to the conclusion that we should fight for a live birth. We'd like him to pass in our arms rather than in inside if possible. We both decided that we'd always wonder what his passing was like and we'd always fear that he may have struggle. When he goes, even though it is very scary for us, we want to watch him on his journey. At my next appointment we plan to discuss this with Dr. Kanten and ask him for this request. We both feel comfortable with this option and feel it is the best for our baby.

I spoke with a woman this week who's baby died in utero from Anencephaly. She was 30 weeks along. She called me on one of my darkest days and I was whining about how I just wanted this to be over and I wanted to be done, blah, blah, blah, blah... She so wisely made me see Austin's journey is just and important and relevant as my other children and future children. She too felt my way once because she wanted to have more babies – but in wishing it to be over, she was really taking away the value and significance of her anencephalic child who really needed her. She made me see that this is Austin's journey and he needs his mom and dad and he loves his mom and dad. Our time is limited, let him complete what he is meant to do. Ah... If your reading this Liz

York – thank you.... Thank you!!! You gave me a new perspective and pulled me out of a rut on a tough day!

We also we approached by our church with an option to have a “Prayer Baby Shower”. As I listened to their proposal about what they’d like to do for us, all I could do was sob. What an honor! I’d get to share my child’s life and lift him up in prayer just right before he needs it the most. My baby was going to get a baby shower! My heart has never been so touch at such a thoughtful and innovative idea. I’ve been kept in the dark about the details, but I do know that it will be Wednesday, November 14, 2007 at 5:30 p.m. I’ve gathered some details about a slide show presentation and a few speakers and a meal following. Kirsten Fuglseth took the initiative and presented the idea to some of the ladies of the church and people are so excited to be able to do something for us. I could hardly believe their enthusiasm!

Austin’s movements are still strong and are actually painful at times. He moves round the clock, always letting me know things are okay and he is fine. Because this could be our last week together, I have made a promise to enjoy him. Today we decorated for Christmas (I know It’s a bit early), but the girls decorated my belly in tinsel and loved it and we took photos. That was sad, but I think it would be more difficult to set up for Christmas after he is gone. This week we are going to take our family photo, while I am pregnant so that he can be apart of this year’s Christmas card. I am also having belly shots taken with the girls and Aaron (all I can say is I hope she’s good with photoshop because I’ve got some nasty stretchmarks!!

November 12, 2007 – November 21, 2007 – 33 \_ weeks

Yes, I am still pregnant. So very much has happened this past week and a half – good things. I'll have to start at the beginning, which was Wednesday, November 14.

We nervously arrived at our prayer shower for Austin, not knowing what to expect. We first walked into a peaceful church lit by candles and soft music heard in the background. They led us downstairs where an overwhelming display of celebration was to take place. To be honest it was decorated exactly how I picture his funeral celebration to be. Blue and white balloons were scattered everywhere. Blue was very different for me to see. With 3 girls, blue is a bit foreign, but such a refreshing change of pace! After a few minutes of visiting with our families, we were led back upstairs to the front pew to await the service.

Walking in the pew, it was evident that the Holy Spirit was at it's best. Although many people shed tears at the song of "Road to Bittersweet", I enjoyed watching Lexi and Aubree sing the words to Austin's song that they knew so well. Many prayers appeared in perfect words on the screen. All in unison, the full church was asked to pray silently specific prayers relating to our baby. Not only were prayers offered for Austin, but the grandmas, grandpas, his sisters and a specific prayer was offered for his doctors and nursing staff. Each slide lasted about 2 minutes and most of the specific prayers were followed by structured prayers. For example, when they asked for prayers for Aaron and the Grandpas, the Lord's Prayer was displayed as a suggestion for people to pray. A calming surrounded me and comfort was all I could feel. I could hear sniffles in the background. I snuck a peak behind me and saw the church filled with standing room only! I saw lots of people with lots of tears. People genuinely cared. The most joy I felt was knowing that Austin's life was of value, not just to me and Aaron but to others too. His life was not minimized like I would sometimes feel. At this moment I was so very proud to be Austin's mom and to shout that he is my little boy.

After the service I thanked everyone for coming and over 200 people were served that night. I read through the guest book (of which only about 60 people signed it) and saw that many people did not join us for the meal. I really don't know everyone who was there, but every body sitting in those pews made a difference in our hearts. We were just showered with hugs and kind words. Our kids ran around like crazy people enjoying the extra, well deserved attention. Not only did we need this, but our kids needed it too. They were able to tell people what was wrong with Austin and how it felt from their point of view. Finally, an appropriate moment for them to talk about their brother with others! This shower came at just the right moment for us, and we couldn't be more grateful to share him with so many people who respect his life as much as we do.

The following day, we were refreshed and calmed and felt ready to discuss our future plans for Austin with Dr. Kanten. Aaron joined me at the dr. and we discussed the pros and cons of what our options were. Our benchmark date of 33 weeks was approaching in a few days and I just knew I wasn't ready. Dr. Kanten confirmed that by saying that Austin's lungs have a high chance of being underdeveloped. He also stated that there is

no guarantee that even if we wait till 40 weeks, he still may not be able to breathe on his own, depending on his brain stem capabilities. He left the room for a bit to speak to the surgeon and I told Aaron that if Austin aspirated due to underdevelopment of his lungs, I couldn't live with my decision. We have come this far – what's another week or two? The last three months will not have been in vain. To me the decision to postpone our plans of a delivery next week were simple. Dr. Kanten did not say he recommended that we wait, but he did indicate more negative than positive opinion at a 33 weeks delivery. Dr. Kanten also stated that Dr. Afonya, the surgeon, was not extremely comfortable with a delivery at 33 weeks, but would do it if that were my wishes. It is my thought that Dr. Kanten is not only thinking of us at the delivery of a early baby, but the nurses and doctors who have to care for him. Why make a bad situation worse? We decided to tentatively wait until November 30 as a tentative birth date for Austin. The labetalol that Dr. Kanten prescribed was helping so much and I was measuring only at 35 weeks so as long as I felt good and the fluid was under control, there was not a reason not to wait. I felt that the prayer shower gave us what we needed to get through the next couple of weeks.

The week itself has been more upbeat. I read a book called Waiting with Gabriel which was given as a gift to me (along with many other keepsakes and cards from the shower). Each time I feel him kick I check the clock, just to make mental notes of the last time he was moving. I am beginning to anticipate the arrival of Austin and imagine holding him, praying for strength and that I just don't freak out at the reality of what is happening. I have many braxton hicks contractions and sometimes I even think that "this might be it" – they always subside.

Aaron and I have had many discussions (and disagreements) on how to handle his birth and our families, how to handle the funeral, and how to handle Aaron's work schedule after Austin arrives. We have many disagreements for all the wrong reasons about his work schedule and I just pray that we can find a common ground. Aaron has never been one to be able to take 1 day off of work. I don't want to be angry or bitter, because the truth is I need him now more than I've ever needed anyone else and I just can't bear the thought of being angry at him at a time like that. I can't stand the thought of having to depend on someone else to get through this either. I just don't think he quite realizes the intensity of our challenges that face us.

We had family photos taken this week with belly shots and I cry each time I look at them. My belly still looks "unhealthy" and shows me that Austin is still head down. The photos turned out beautiful and I am so thankful that my sister talked me into taking the photos. Kind of ironic though – I hate being pregnant and those are my very favorite photos!

On November 21, I had another dr. appointment and Dr. Kanten said I was still measuring at about 35 weeks. We set the date for November 30<sup>th</sup>. He spoke with another OBGYN specialist who also did not recommend a c-section for us. They both felt that the risk was too great for me, when a natural delivery can be achieved. They also expressed concern for future pregnancies (which I insisted is probably not an issue!) Either way, they did not feel that was the correct action to take. The specialist told Dr.

Kanten that a normal delivery should be anticipated and complications were not as likely as you would think. They will avoid the manual rupture of membranes. Dr. Kanten prepared me that just because we are trying to have the baby doesn't mean that the pitocin will work. He said that I may get sent home that evening if things do not happen. He also said that he is not for an emergency c-section if Austin begins to show distress during labor. I agreed that isn't the right action either. I can only control so much. Austin has to be born eventually and his strength is out of my hands. Dr. Kanten would like to meet with us next week one more time to review the procedure and possible complications. I will go to the hospital on November 29 be prepped for the induction the next day.

I am nervously awaiting the delivery. I am so very scared and I find myself glad that Aaron seems to be able to just pick up and go to work, keeping his mind clear of what's to come....but at the same time, I can easily find myself angry with him because I feel like I am thinking about this and anticipating this all by myself. I am worried not only about the delivery, his birth, his death, but the aftermath of coming home without my baby and not being ready to just pick up and be "mom" again to my other three. I am worried about my milk coming in. I am worried about our family dynamics – not just the five of us, but our extended families too and how this is going to affect us all as a whole – will we all be closer or will things said or done tear us apart? He doesn't seem to want to talk about it at all with me. It is one of his strong suits to not anticipate things or worry about them until they happen. I on the other hand, am noted for worrying ahead of time.

November 22, 2007 - December 1, 2007 35 weeks

This week has been okay – better for us than the people around us who love us. Many people have expressed lots of pity and sadness for us, just because they love us so much and hate to see us hurt. We think that's sweet, but thankfully we've been able to tell them how excited we are. We know the end result is the same at this point, so we were really trying to focus on the enjoyment of holding our baby. We have waited so long for this upcoming moment. We are trying to avoid the thoughts of the upcoming finality of his life. We are just waiting for those few moments and are hopeful that time will stop for us for just a while.

Our events started November 29 – we met with Dr. Kanten in Fertile that morning and were able to finalize the plans for Austin's induction. Although he could not guarantee anything he was pretty optimistic that Austin would be born live, but did say he doubted a fair amount of time with him. He also did say he was not guaranteeing any one scenario. I was sad to hear that, but I was glad I asked. I was beginning to fantasize weeks with my baby, not hours. I still had time to reroute my brain to just an hour or less with him and anything more would be just an unexpected blessing.

We arrived in Crookston that night at around 5 p.m. We were able to have one more ultra sound to verify that Austin was in birthing position. Aaron's mom and my sister were able to attend the ultra sound and were able to see him alive. He was so big so the clarity was really low functioning. His head was so low, it was difficult to get a good head shot at all. We got some great feet shots which verified he will have large feet for his age! She thought almost 3 inches long already. She estimated his weight to be 4 lbs. 10 oz. Anencephaly was still the diagnosis. And it was said that there was an extreme amount of extra fluid. I have to say I was still hoping for the miracle I keep asking for. I don't think I will believe the diagnosis until he's in my arms and I can visually see it. I will always think – they may be wrong, even though the photos clearly show they are correct.

As I was hooked up the monitors, I was already having regular contractions, which I usually do at night anyway. Within 20 minutes after the Cytotec, I began to feel it's purpose. The contractions were regular and often although they were not lasting long. I was not in an extreme amount of pain, but it was definitely too uncomfortable to fall asleep throughout the night so I was given ambient to help me sleep a bit. Dr. Kanten gave me 3 does of Cytotec throughout the night.

Dr. Kanten told me I had gone from 0 to 1 cm throughout the nigh. I was pretty optimistic that we'd be having a baby that day. They began the pitocin at 6 a.m. and the pain was constant all day – My back ache was so painful I couldn't even feel my stomach. I felt like I did with Ally just before I was begging for my interthecal. I had to wait until Dr. Kanten came around noon only to find out that I was now 1 \_ cm dilated. How devastating! I thought for sure I'd be at 2 or 3. I immediately asked for some pain relief. I was given Nubain. Although I could still feel the contractions, I was able to sleep most of the afternoon away and was up around 4 p.m. visiting with our families in the waiting room. By 5:30 I was begging for more Nubain. Dr. Kanten checked me and

said that there had been no change since he had been there last. He gave me another dose of Nubain and said he'd only keep the pitocin running until 9:30.

Throughout the day, Austin heart beat was so difficult to find because of the extra fluid. They'd find it and then it would just disappear. At some point his rate dropped down to 100, but for most of the day it seemed to stay around 140.

The Nubain helped me sleep a little more and pain woke me. I was thinking that things had to be happening by now, but I was so tired that I honestly wanted to be sent home! I was able to spend some more time with our families and by 9:30 Dr. Kanten confirmed that no change had been made. He did another quick ultra sound to be sure that Austin was okay and that his head was still down. We rescheduled for one week. You'd think I'd be devastated, but I was so exhausted and relieved that the pit was unplugged. Before we left the hospital that I wasn't feeling good and was full of nausea.

I threw up on the way home and spent the rest of the night wishing I could throw up more. I was up every hour, still having contractions and having to pee. I wanted to have this baby, but I was so exhausted that I'd hoped it was a false alarm. Throughout the whole next day (Saturday), I was happy to see my other 3 kids, but still so tired. I slept periodically in between bathroom breaks and contractions. My tummy was so tight – and very stiff and sore from the day before. By 5 p.m. I was feeling better physically.

Mentally, I was wishing I wasn't feeling better. I had babysitters all lined up for the whole weekend. It was just perfect. I was so prepared for this baby's arrival. I was hoping that once we gone home, I would have been prepped enough for a spontaneous delivery. When I started to feel better, I became really down. The thought of being induced again scares me to death. I just don't know if I can do it. It was so painful. At least if it's sprung on me – it will happen without me authorizing pain and suffering for myself! Funny how you forget what labor pains feel like, but how they come right back to you when you are faced with them again. Completely unexplainable.

So as for now I am still pregnant. I can begin to feel Austin's movements again. My tummy was so tight all day yesterday I don't think I felt him once! But today, he's back to his same old tricks, rolling all around. I am praying harder than ever now that I never have to look at pitocin again!

December 2, 2007 - December 5, 2007 – Almost 35 \_ weeks

This week I have been highly anticipating what is to come. Having just a tiny bit of labor pain has scared me into never wanting more children and searching for a way to back out of delivering this one! By Monday (3 days after the attempted induction), the residual labor pains were absent. My hopes for a spontaneous delivery were dissipating and at the beginning of the week I found myself so very angry at God. I said some horrible things and wondered why he couldn't just give ONE thing I ask for. Something so easy for him to do, why do I feel like I am being tortured?! I thought maybe getting out of the house would help so the girls and I packed our bags and drove to Walmart – p.s. we will never do that again either!

By Tuesday night, we had found some hope. My sister Tammy shared our story with her doctor, who felt huge compassion with us and told her of a priest's gravesite in Alexandria, MN. His site is said to be of "holy" ground and people who visited his site and been miraculously healed. The doctor himself found healing from Bells Palsy from visiting this grave. FINALLY... some hope for us! Father Bob said that he has heard of this holy ground and the Bishop in Fargo has recognized this site as holy. We knew all we needed was faith that a miracle could happen – but whether or not it is God's plan was another, but we had to give it a shot. My sister said she'd watch the girls if we wanted to make the trip. Both Aaron & I felt like we were being pulled in that direction for some reason. Early Wednesday morning Aaron, his dad, Aubree and I packed our bags and talked about the possibility of a supernatural, miraculous healing for our baby. We found the grave site, shoveled some snow and asked for intercession. A huge coincidence was that this deceased priest's middle name was John, just like Austin's.

Also that evening, a friend of ours offered her home for healing prayers. She was introduced to missionaries who sought to pray for healing for Austin. We welcomed the opportunity and that evening spent about 1 hour in constant prayer over Austin.

We are so very curious and hopeful for Austin's birthday. We are willing to accept the cards we've been dealt, but the two events have given us the most hope we've ever had for Austin.

December 6, 2007 – December 9, 2007 – **AUSTIN'S BIRTH**

I am writing this log about 20 lbs. of fluid thinner than before. Austin has been born.

On Thursday, December 6, we made our trip to the hospital at around 5 p.m. Dr. Kanten administered the Cytotec 3 different times throughout the night and by the time Friday morning came, I was at 3 cm. When I was told that news I was so excited. I was able to sleep all night with just minor cramping – which different than the week before. An unexpected blessing!

Throughout the day, labor slowly began. All day I could feel contractions, but only asked for Nubain at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., just to help with my back labor. I was able to sleep for time or two throughout the day and was actually able to spend a good portion of the day with our families in the waiting room. By 10 p.m. I was at 7 cm and was basically comfortable, with noticeable aches and pains, but still able to walk around and visit.

Dr. Kanten discussed our options and his concerns with rupturing membranes. He said that labor will probably continue to progress but at a very slow pace throughout the night. Breaking my water was an option to make things happen fast; he was concerned with the enormous amount of fluid and the possibility of a cord accident. Little or no amniotic fluid was not an ideal situation for very long with an infant like Austin and could cause a possible death in before birth if labor does not happen quickly after. He conferred with another OBGYN in Grand Forks who did suggest breaking my water – so that is what he did at 9:30 p.m..

He broke the first one which was just trickle, at 9:30 p.m. and later discovered there was another bag at 10 p.m. When that one ruptured, a flood occurred. I looked at my stomach and I couldn't even tell I was pregnant any more, but the pain quickly reminded me I was. There was no way to measure the amount of fluid, but the nurses described multiple gallons without exaggeration.

Within minutes I was begging for pain relief! They gave me more Nubain which helped to take the edge of the contractions. An interthecal was also an option but I knew from previous deliveries that I didn't have much time and it would be a painful shot in the back wasted. At 10:44, Austin was born – ALIVE!

There was no repertory effort at all on his part. I think Dr. Kanten could tell by the lack of response to stimulation so the plans for placing him in the warmer first changed and he handed him to me immediately. Austin stared directly in my eyes, completely catatonic. Not one blink or movement, but his heart was beating and we got to tell him what we wanted to say. His skin was the softest skin I've ever felt. I wanted to be so close to him. I never thought I'd say it but in hindsight, even though I was completely miserable, having him inside me was the closest you can ever get to your children. I wanted to see him and touch him so badly, I didn't realize that I was touching him for the last 4 months until just now. When you know you don't have much time, it's devastating that time

doesn't just stand still, but you cherish every second. But when you think you have plenty of time, like during a pregnancy, time seems to go so slowly.

Aaron baptized him right away with holy water – what an honor for a father. I held him and each of us took one hand to hold. It was difficult to determine when he left us as there was not one single sign of struggle, but the nurses generously gave us a confirmation of 11 minutes with him.

Austin's features were very distinct. Because of the Anencephaly, it was impossible to see who his eyes resembled but at first glance I thought they were brown (which I thought was kind of neat because my brother is brown eyed and that's \_ of Austin's namesake), but later I looked and they were definitely denim blue. His face and his body was covered in a white film (all early babies have this on their skin). His face also had a lot of fuzz/hair (which is also common for early babies) His lips were so full and perfect – they to me resembled Ally, but some of our family thought his lips were more like Aubree's. His ears, because of the Anencephaly, were curled down and lower closer to his neck, which was Aaron's favorite feature.

Those 11 minutes were complete and utter quality time and nothing less. I don't think Aaron and I took our eyes off of him for one single second. My sister was able to watch his birth and was able to video tape every minute of his life for us. The very best keepsake we could ask for. After he passed, she quietly snuck out of the room to share the tape with the family in the waiting room.

As Dr. Kanten warned and from what other mom's say about earlier labor, the placenta delivery was difficult. Eventually it detached, but I was not very excited about the process of detaching it! I would not recommend early labor to anyone, I kept hoping that would come as I did not want a D & C for that, but at 11:06, Dr. Kanten won the tug of war game with that issue.

Everything about his birth (except the last 45 minutes of indescribable pain) was perfect. The hospital staff and doctors couldn't have done it any better than they did and by far exceeded our expectations. One of our nurses spent her evening making foot molds and hand molds of Austin for us – what a treasure that I just didn't have the energy to do myself.

Aaron's mom and his sister drove back to Fertile to pick up the girls at about midnight or 1 a.m. (Dr. Kanten thought morning may be too late to have an appropriate viewing for the girls) I think watching my girls with him was the most treasured moment we would have missed out on completely had we chosen a different way. Their innocence amazed me and their complete unconditional love for him was overwhelmingly obvious. I was so afraid I would hear negative comments just because they are kids and all kids see what they see and say what they think (at least mine do!) Although we kept Austin's hat on the entire time, this did not notice any of his anomalies! I found myself wishing I could see Austin through their eyes. Lexi mentioned that he was a lot darker than she thought he'd be (Austin was born face first instead of the crown of the head and he was looking

up through the birth canal so his face was purple at birth plus the lack of oxygen gave him a darker shade). Aubree spent her time with him covering him up with blankets like she had always done while I was pregnant. Both girls took their time taking turns and showing him off to our families. They were so proud and so very brave. When it was time to say goodbye they were so sad, knowing they never see him again and that was a difficult pain for Aaron and I to fix as parents.

I wanted to sleep next to Austin all night, but I really wanted those molds done and there wouldn't have been time in the a.m. I slept and surprisingly I slept hard. When the nurse brought Austin to me in the morning I cried. He had changed so much. His luscious lips that he was born with were nearly gone. The hat that fit him just perfectly hours before was just way too big now. It was so hard to let go of that body, even though I knew he didn't need it anymore. I was so sad that it took him all that time to grow such a beautiful body and he had no use for any of it. We did have a photographer come in that morning and take photos of him so I am so anxious to see them. The only regret I have is that I only took 3 profile photos of Austin. The head on photos with this type of anomaly may be difficult for people to view, but the side profile shots were just how I want to remember him and I am sad that I only took three.

At 10:30 a.m., the funeral director came with Austin's casket where Aaron laid him. I had nothing to do but sob with Aaron. Watching his body deteriorate and become cold so quickly was hard, but watching him go and never touching him again was harder. I even told the funeral director to drive safely (a mother never quits being a mom I guess!)

Aaron and I packed our bags and went home, without our baby to a house full of girls who needed us. Thank God they did because I think we needed them more. Lexi, Aubree and I cried ourselves to sleep that night, but we did it together and that was okay. Lexi was so sad because she had forgotten what he looks like already. I looked back at the photos we took and even I can't remember him looking the way the photos show. I understood what she was feeling.

We have spent our whole day today (Sunday) planning Austin's burial and funeral arrangements, a decision I have been so torn apart by. Our community has displayed the most beautiful show of support and I don't think we could have gotten by without their kind words, cards, phone calls, e-mails, food – you name it, they've done it! When it came time to plan Austin's service, I just knew I couldn't face the crowd. It is just going to be too soon for me. It isn't that I don't want their love or hugs and thoughts they want to send my way...because I so desperately want it. I just am having a hard time putting myself out there for everyone to watch me do this. I am so scared. I have been so afraid that by not having a full blown funeral, we'd be turning away the very support that we need. I explained my feelings to our funeral director and our priest. He assured me that people can still show their support through cards, phone calls, and flowers. People will not be offended that we are choosing to keep Austin's service to family and close friends. He insisted that most people understand that the loss of a child, especially so soon after delivery is a combination of hormones and grief all in one and no one will feel hurt or offended. He also said that most people were allowed into Austin's life through the

prayer shower we were given and were honored to show their support that night. People will be happy they were still able to express their support at a much happier time, like at our prayer shower. We decided for a small service for family and close friends at our home town catholic church at 2 p.m. on Tuesday, December 11. We were able to work out the details.

Aaron has been floating on little or no sleep, and yet he is trying so hard to help me. I feel just as bad for him and I do for me and I hope he knows that he can be sad with us. There is no way we can go around this and be healthy, we all have to go thru it. Him and I have become so much closer through these past 4 months. We've had our disagreements, but we have always met a common ground. I hope that I can be what he needs me to be like he is being what I need him to be. I know it's killing him to take time away from work this week – that is his escape and his calming area. He is really giving our kids a great example of what a man is and what family is all about. Thankfully too, our extended families have been so good to us at and are trying so hard to give us what we need when we need it, even though they are hurting for their loss too.

I am beginning to feel my milk come in. I am yearning so much to nurse my baby! I have nursed all three of our children and I loved every second of it (until I got bit). By tomorrow morning, I will be full and my yearning will only be stronger, giving me a natural sense to want my baby. I am expecting a rough day tomorrow.

We have had such a busy phone and door bell today. People brought presents for our kids (because they are big sisters you know!), meals for us, cards and some brought the most needed hugs. When people call they are so good when Lexi answers and most of the time she can't wait to talk about her baby brother. It is so good for her and good for us to hear her enthusiasm. Tomorrow the girls are looking forward to picking out flowers for Austin's funeral. Hopefully that will go better than our most recent Walmart trip!

December 12, 2007 – **The day after we buried Austin**

Austin's service was held yesterday and I was so sad at what we were there to do, but yet I was once again, given grace. I hate funerals in the winter time. I sobbed at the thought of leaving my baby out in the cold! Such a human thought, I suppose. As a mom, I just want to keep him warm (maybe Aubree gets her blanket fetish from me?) Aaron handled everything perfectly, just like a man would do. I think his mother was rather exceptionally proud. I couldn't imagine the emotions I would feel if I had to watch my son so bravely carry his child's casket to a grave. Aaron so proudly grabbed a of Austin's new bed, without tears, but Aaron was actually gleaming with pride. I was proud of him.

The service was perfect, the music, the video of Austin's life, the homily, the mass. There was nothing left untouched. It was a small service and many of Austin's extended family sent flowers for the altar. I just loved reading the cards on the altar and was so thankful that people honored our baby with flowers and balloons, even if they had never met him. I can't quite tell if I am glad that we had a small service or if I wished we'd have just included everyone. I suppose that will come. I was just so afraid of facing people at the time we were planning his service.

After the service, we buried Austin's remains and we chose to not watch the undertaker lower Austin into the ground. I couldn't get away fast enough from that cemetery, but I felt so guilty for leaving my baby. Such a battle of mixed emotions – again the human side talking. My faith knows that he has no need for that hard working little body anymore.

We all celebrated downstairs with an amazing meal. The gals that put on the prayer shower again volunteered to serve his service. VOLUNTEERED! They gave up their whole day to prepare a ham meal. Austin has touched their hearts so severely; they all said they were honored to do it. I think they love my little boy genuinely as he was a part of them. They said that was their gift to us – Kirsten Fuglseth, Pam Reese, Patty Mosher, Renee' Rongen, & LeAnne Sannes. They planned for extra so that we'd have plenty of food to take home with us to eat for the week. We are so blessed to belong to such a powerful faith community.

I enjoyed all the relatives and their hugs. Father Bob and Father Jerry were able attend and assist Father Roger. Father Jerry was the priest we married Aaron & I and my childhood priest for most of my younger years, and Father Bob has been our spiritual advisor concerning Austin. I so enjoyed meeting with him again and sharing Austin stories after the service. He told me that he knew if we were faithful, grace would find us – and it did. They explained how a funeral like this is priests biggest wish. Many times they have funerals and do not know the where a soul was spiritually when a human passes. When Austin passed, they found such pleasure in know that Heaven has another saint. Austin is free from sin and seated automatically, without a doubt, next to Jesus. They both said it with such pleasure and satisfaction. To hear them talk about my baby as a saint were words that every mother would give her life to hear. So amazing that a

person who did not breathe one single breath gave us all so much to talk about. We know nothing about Austin as far as a schedule, his likes, his dislikes, his sense of humor, etc.; but there are so many amazing stories to be told of him; I never would have guessed.

Some of our family members and a few friends gathered at our house after the supper. We drank wine and ate tons of sweets that my Aunt had mailed us (she figured I didn't have much time to do Christmas baking). It felt so good to laugh with the people who love us, and I mean truly gut wrenching laughter. We shared tears too, but the wine seemed to bring out the laughter for the evening, and it felt good (until the next morning!)

Things are settling down around here in my head. Seems like I have put so much into Austin's service I haven't even had much time to reflect on our journey with our baby. Today I spent some much needed time and tears remembering the last 4 months.

I miss my baby. I keep looking at his pictures, so afraid I am going to forget him. Seems like I can't remember what it feels like to even hold him. Even with all of that, we are seeing so many of the hindsight's of the past 4 months.

We've analyzed unanswered prayers (some we haven't figured out yet). I can't even count the amount of times I cried in bed, completely begging God to take this cross from me. I'd drive myself crazy with anticipation (I'm not a real patient person). I was so afraid and I just didn't want to think about it anymore. How thankful I am right now for that unanswered prayer – Seeing Austin at 36 weeks was a gift. Even though he was a premie– he had all the premie fuzz on his face, and the white dots all over his face, and the white lotion that covered his body at birth, an earlier birth would have had much more visual issues. If God would have given me, what I would have called the miracle of spontaneous labor earlier, I would have not had such a visual blessing. He would have been so tiny and so very premature, I doubt he'd have even looked much like a baby and I would not have gotten the 8x10 picture I now have on my wall. What a blessing! Had God answered my prayers to take Austin to heaven when I was 20 some weeks along, we'd have missed the prayer shower, the stacks of cards in the mail with people constantly telling us we were heroes and that we were doing the right thing. We wouldn't have been able to share Austin with Fertile – something we are so proud to have done. There just wouldn't have been time and I wasn't open to sharing him so early on. Time healed so much pain and towards the end of the pregnancy, I was still sad for the outcome, but my pain and heartache was turning to excitement to see our baby and compare him to our others. It was exciting (and sad) to help Austin into the next chapter in his life. I just know when Austin met Jesus, he was told of all the wonderful things he gave to us and that Austin was able to see what he'd done for us. We aren't the same people we were before him. Jesus was probably just as excited as we were to have Austin be born.

We are so thankful for our doctor and Riverview Healthcare. Our doctor chose to take this challenge on. I was a high risk pregnancy and there were so many uncertainties and not enough full term babies with anencephaly to even get much research on the what to do's and what not to do's. He took a risk to help us out. Without him, we'd have

probably delivered in Fargo or Minneapolis, away from my desperately needed kids and family. I can remember during just before Austin was to be born, Dr. Kanten reminded us to get the baptism items ready. Even after Austin was born, it was Dr. Kanten who reminded Aaron about the baptism. From many stories I have read and many mom's I have talked to, they have had such a difficult and heartbreaking time to find a doctor who will value their babies life. They have to travel far and wide to find a doctor to support their decision to continue an already doomed pregnancy. How fortunate are we to have found him right in our home town?

I have been reflecting on my last day with Austin. My biggest fear was the horrifying pain of labor. That was one prayer I pleaded for and it was answered. I had a long labor with such minor pain. Who can get to 7 cm and still be walking, talking and enjoying their time with the family in the waiting room? I know that each time I'd lay in bed, I'd pray. I didn't know what to pray for and honestly, I didn't take time to learn the rosary (I've been catholic all my life and I know about the rosary, but I don't know the schedule of prayers). So I just decided to repeat the Hail Mary 5 times and break with an Our Father and did that until I'd fall asleep. I remember that with Ally's birth to; I finally surrendered and from the bottom of my heart prayed for it to be done and within minutes I went from 6 cm to 10. Prayer really is powerful, but I think God knows your heart. He knows what you need and when you need it.

I remember being so angry the week after the first induction failed. How I had felt completely abandoned by God and I'll admit, I was down right mean to him in my head. I had felt tortured and couldn't believe he was going to put me through one more week after giving me a little taste of labor. That week was the greatest week. I'd have missed so much. We had just a little hope for Austin when we visited Daren Didier's grave in Alexandria, and that felt so good. I was able to spend the day with my daughter one on one and for the first time I was able to share Austin with my father – in – law. It was a good day.

Through this whole journey, I have gotten to meet so many great people. The support group from Prenatal Partners for Life has given me contacts and some life long friends that we'll always have something in common with. Even the nurses at the hospital have been truly touched by Austin's story, they have sent cards, food and phone calls our way. They see many babies each year, but Austin will be one baby that will never be forgotten.

I know there is going to be up days and down days and in between days. With the hormones flagging me into tears over spilled milk subside, I am hoping to be strong and a better mother to my other three. I hope to be a better person to others who may need me. I have learned a lot from our church and how the gals just banded together and loved helping us in hopes of making this journey a little easier – what whole heartedly good people they are. There are minutes when I feel happy and content for Austin and then there are hours where I feel so guilty for life continuing without him. A part of our family is gone, how can we have fun without him? I am hoping that as time goes on, the happy times turn to hours and the guilty sad times turn to minutes. I haven't even been not pregnant for a week yet, so I know all this is just going to take time. The first initial part

of going back to work and just getting back into the schedule of things is going to be a big adjustment. I would have never realized that the guilt of continuing on without him would be so very strong and apparent.

There are so many things to reflect on. I can honestly say that if God gave Aaron and I the option to have never done this; to never have even been pregnant with Austin and to never have even heard the word Anencephaly; if God said it's either Austin with Anencephaly or no Austin at all, we'd choose Austin. It was not easy and at times the most difficult thing we'll ever face, but knowing what we know now, I'd do it all over again, just for that one chance to hold his hand and cry while he went to heaven. I'd take nothing back and I have no regrets. He is my son and I can't wait for the day when I get to heaven and he says "Mom, I've been waiting for you".