

After battling infections, Grenada boy 'back in the game'

By Ruth Cummins
UMMC

When fourth-grader Corbin Connerley began running a high fever last fall, his mother thought it was one more sinus infection in need of treatment and a watchful eye.

Corbin received antibiotics for that infection on September 26, but when his fever spiked, they headed the next afternoon back to the Emergency Department at the University of Mississippi Medical Center Grenada. "He had a delusional episode on the way," Gena Connerley remembered. "He opened the door on the highway and said he was going to get out of the vehicle."

His caregivers there found the infection had spread to the space around his brain and rushed him by ambulance to Batson Children's Hospital at UMMC in Jackson. Batson houses Mississippi's only pediatric intensive care unit and emergency department solely for kids.

Thus began a frightening series of medical events that took Corbin from being partially paralyzed on one side to undergoing two brain surgeries and removal of his gall bladder, and months later, back to being a typical 10-year-old who loves to play ball and goof around with his 13-year-old brother Caleb.

"We are a normal kid



Corbin Connerley's final surgery to replace a frozen section of his skull plate took place January 25 at Batson Children's Hospital. (Photo by UMMC)

now," Gena said of Corbin, who has been homeschooled since his September illness pending the return to his Kirk Academy classroom in Grenada.

"I never once thought we needed to get a second opinion" about Corbin's diagnosis in Grenada and Jackson, she said. "I never once thought that this wasn't where he was supposed to be."

When Corbin and his mom arrived at Batson's Pediatric Emergency Department on September 27, Gena said, her husband and Corbin's dad, Jonathan Connerley, was deployed to Kuwait with the Mississippi National Guard. Batson staff "said to get with the Red Cross to contact my husband," she said. "That panicked me."

"Being 7,000 miles away from something where nor-

mally, you'd do whatever you could ... I couldn't do anything except wait for a call or a text," Jonathan said. "But I knew that he was in good hands and that he had plenty of family support. I knew everything was going to be fine."

Corbin developed partial paralysis on his left side. "By that evening, his hand had stopped moving as well," Gena said.

"The infection spread inside of the skull and under the covering of the brain," said Dr. Kristin Weaver, assistant professor of neurosurgery. "The treatment is surgical drainage and antibiotics. This type of infection can be dangerous and very aggressive."

It took Jonathan three days to return to Mississippi. "We were still in the ICU," Gena said. "The surgeon said it was more extensive than we thought."

As part of a complex surgery, part of Corbin's skull was removed and frozen, not to be returned to his head until the infection and swelling cleared. Caleb showed his love by shaving his own head so Corbin wouldn't be alone in having his locks removed.

Corbin had to wear a special helmet as he began physical therapy at Batson for his paralysis. After a three-week stay, much of it in the ICU, Corbin returned home with a wheelchair and walker and continued therapy at UMMC Grenada. Jonathan returned to Kuwait.

"They worked him, and he worked very hard," Gena said of Corbin. "He was Corbin again. They put him back together like it had never happened."

But weeks of antibiotics had taken a toll. Corbin developed gallstones, then pancreatitis. He returned to Batson, where surgeons removed his gall bladder.

"We got home the day before Christmas Eve," his mom said. "They were trying so hard to get us out for Christmas. It was the sweetest thing. Santa and the elves came through the hospital before we left, and Gov. (Phil) Bryant and his wife."

Gena also got a sweet surprise. Her women's ministry at First Baptist Church in Grenada had sewn 200 cheery pillowcases for Batson patients. "The presents that Santa brought to the children's rooms were inside the pillowcases," Gena said. "I got to see what our ministry does. It was icing on the cake."

The gallbladder surgery pushed the procedure to re-attach the portion of Corbin's skull to late January. "Jonathan couldn't come back for that," Gena said.

Weaver "has been our amazing angel all through this," Gena said. "We were wondering and worried



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that he would have to have a drain put in, but she said his head was good, and they had minimal bleeding. She put the skull back on with screws and plates."

"Once the brain swelling went down and the infection was cleared, we put his bone back in," Weaver said. "He did great. He was always a brave and strong kid."

They were almost finished with the setbacks. Almost.

The antibiotics Corbin received during the third surgery triggered an antibiotic-associated clostridium difficile, or C. diff, infection. "But when we left the hospital, it was like it was all over," Gena said. "We had our skull, we had no helmet, and we had no paralysis."

They needed a break. It came under a cloak of secrecy. Unknown to Gena and the boys, Jonathan had conspired with Mississippi State University to surprise them when he was supposed to be in Texas, debriefing after returning from deployment in Kuwait.

Corbin was invited as a special treat to a MSU baseball game on February 22 in Starkville, where he'd get the honor of throwing the first pitch. The plan was for Jonathan to pretend he was the catcher.

"I was a nervous wreck. I was pacing back and forth in the players' lounge. I hadn't seen Corbin since I left him in the hospital," Jonathan said of the minutes before he ran onto the field in catcher's mask and uniform.

As Gena and the boys stood on the pitcher's mound, video of Jonathan appeared on the field's scoreboard. "It was a shock. I thought they'd done that for the boys," Gena

said.

Corbin "threw the pitch, and the catcher came to give him the ball, and he looked up and hollered, 'Dad!' "Gena said. When Jonathan took off his mask, Gena and Caleb joined Corbin in an emotional bear hug.

"After all the struggles that Corbin and Caleb have been through, we can have this good and happy and exciting memory," Gena said.

Corbin is glad to get back to football, baseball, church basketball, tennis and table tennis. He loves to draw and paint and has a Golden Labrador named Wyngs. "She sleeps with Corbin most nights," Gena said.

"I remember being scared after the surgery instead of before," Corbin said. "That was the first time I ever had stitches. It annoyed me. I couldn't scratch my head."

Throughout his treatment, "they took their time and explained everything to me. I'm not a medical person," Gena said. "They explained everything to Jonathan. We could always get in touch with the nurses."

"We use a multidisciplinary approach," Weaver said. "In addition to our neurosurgery team, we have neurologists, the ICU team, infectious diseases team, pediatric team, a fantastic nursing staff, and many others who were involved in his care. Our goal is to give excellent care."

Despite the twists and turns of Corbin's illness, "he's managed to make close to 100 percent recovery, if not 100 percent," Weaver said.

"Corbin never cried or complained about anything," Gena said. "He never once thought he would not make a complete recovery."

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