COTA Celebrates Independence Day

The coast-to-coast celebration of our nation's freedom has begun. This week we will be remembering the men and women around the world who have protected, and who are protecting, our freedoms.



COTA Dad Matthew Santos, a U. S. Army Veteran, is one of those heroes. He joined the Army in 2006 as an Airborne Infantrymen and was stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington, from 2007 - 2010. He completed two combat deployments to Iraq while stationed there. Matthew was then stationed in Grafenwoehr Germany from 2010 - 2013 and was deployed to Afghanistan. From 2013 – 2014, he was stationed at Fort Hood (now Fort Cavaos) in Killeen, Texas, where he was medically discharged due to service-connected injuries sustained while deployed.

However, Matthew is the first to admit that throughout his years of service, he never faced a bigger battle than the one he and his wife, Amy, encountered when their daughter, Lyla Grace, was born in March 2014. At just three days old, it was discovered Lyla had some heart issues that needed to be quickly addressed and corrected. They were flown from Fort Hood to San Antonio for an 'arch' repair. After 28 days in San Antonio, Matthew, Amy and Baby Lyla were flown back to Fort Hood where they hoped the baby would start to thrive. Instead, the family had to return to San Antonio in May due to a problem with her coronary arteries pumping blood into her lungs and not her heart. She was listed for a new heart and the family was sent back to their home at Fort Hood. That September, when Matthew was medically discharged from the Army, the Santos family relocated to Abilene to focus on Lyla's care and eventual heart transplant at Dallas Children's Hospital.

It was not until Lyla was almost two years old that a heart was found. In early January 2016, Lyla Grace received her new heart, and her second chance at life. According to Matthew, "We waited a year for her new heart. It was traumatic to us … the waiting … watching our baby struggle … knowing another child had to die for Lyla to live. It was a very hard time."

With the wait for Lyla's perfect heart, the transplant and the post-transplant expenses, financial realities became challenging for this family. Matthew said, "I did not want to have to ask for help; I was a proud person … a Veteran … but eventually we needed assistance."

Nearly a year and a half after her heart transplant, the Santos family became part of the COTA Family and Lyla Grace became a COTA Kid. They will be forever grateful.

Throughout Lyla's transplant journey, Matthew has referred to her as "Lyla the Lioness." He remembers the heart surgeon telling them that, when the new heart was placed in her little chest, it started beating on its own and did not have to be shocked. The transplant surgeon was quite surprised, but Matthew was not because of her 'Lion spirit.'

Today, nine-year-old Lyla is seven years post transplant. She attends public school and excels. She takes minimal medications and is always ready for a new adventure. Recently she and Matthew attended an Abilene Airshow where this photo was taken. Matthew commented, “My Little Paratrooper.”



COTA salutes Dad Matthew Santos for his service and celebrates with him and his wife, Amy, that Lyla Grace is living life to the fullest with her perfect heart.

COTA also salutes The American Legion Family of supporters. These Miracle Makers have made a life-saving difference for many of our families. We are grateful for their continued support and their collective service to our country. The American Legion Family has helped us provide our services completely free of charge to transplant families, like the Santos family.

Happy 4th of July!