

# Worry turned to wonder as preemie beat odds

By TIM SMITH  
STAFF WRITER

**P**hyllis and Del Sellers spent lots of time during the past 11 years wringing their hands and wondering if their micropreemie son Ryan would ever overcome the serious health problems caused by his extreme prematurity.



Initially, the West Bloomfield couple wondered whether their son would survive long enough to come home. Then, they had doubts he'd ever speak. Or do much of anything.

A daily ritual was squirting a tube of saline solution through a trachea tube (inserted in his throat following a tracheotomy) and suctioning out mucus to clear the child's lungs. "We worried he'd not be able to speak because of the trachea," said the 40-year-old Del, director of manufacturing at Speeding Systems, Inc. in Rochester Hills. "And now he doesn't stop talking."

It must be music to their ears.

That's because Ryan is staying the course on his long journey to healthy adulthood, a trek with inauspicious beginnings: doctors gave the family little hope he'd survive; he was only two pounds and two ounces when born at 26 weeks gestation on March 2, 1984 and spent a total of about six months on a ventilator at William

Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak. He had infection after infection in the neonatal intensive care unit. He also developed chronic lung (hyaline-membrane) disease, eye damage and bleeding in the brain.

## Looking back

Ryan himself is well aware of his medical struggles and the specialized care that enabled him to survive. "I feel like I was the lucky one. I think other babies should be as lucky as I am. If it wasn't for them (doctors) I wouldn't be here right now," Ryan said, speaking the last two words with great emphasis.

Phyllis nodded toward her son and then returned to her recollections of a difficult time. "We did a journal for all of March, which was the month he was born, and then we stopped," she recalled. "The news wasn't so great. It didn't look good for Ryan."

It also didn't lift the parents' spirits that micropreemie boys, for some unexplained reason, usually do not fare as well as their female counterparts. According to Phyllis, who said an incompetent cervix is what prompted the very-premature delivery, she sometimes wished Ryan had been born a girl.

"I just swear girls do better, and I don't know why," she said. "At that time, when he was having all that trouble, I thought 'Why couldn't he have been a girl, he'd be doing better by now.'"

## He's happy, active

Turning the page ahead to 1995, those regrets have long since dissipated.

More important, Ryan is happy and active: he skis, shoots basketball, plays around with his little sister, Ashley (4½-year-old) and is a "Legomaniac," proficient with the plastic hands-on toys.

He's doing OK with a modified curriculum at Scotch Elementary School in the West Bloomfield district, particularly enjoying the subject of math.

"I was born to solve math problems," Ryan said recently after school, proudly wearing his Scotch T-shirt.

Phyllis said the chances are good that Ryan will be able to graduate from West Bloomfield High School and go on from there to lead a relatively normal life.

"We've been told he could probably hold down a job, he could probably go to college . . . We always thought he'd probably live with us the rest of our lives, but now they're saying no, that maybe he will be able to get an apartment. Someone will probably have to check up on him," she said.

## Difficulties remain

Phyllis said Ryan's positive attitude is the main ingredient for such predictions.

"When you ask him how he is in the morning, he'll say, 'Things are going great, Mom.'"

Things aren't perfect, though. Problems remain that are directly linked to his prematurity. Ryan has attention deficit disorder and suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, an offshoot of autism. He also struggles socially and suffers from occasional bouts with asthma, the latter requiring regular breathing treatments.

"His lungs never really got over it," said Phyllis referring to the chronic lung disease. "But his asthma is minimal. I know kids that didn't have these problems and they have worse asthma."

Severe problems with his breathing were apparent as soon as Ryan was born. "When babies come out of the womb, they automatically close off this little duct so they can breathe air, because in the womb . . . they use oxygen from their mother's blood. But (for Ryan)

they had to do surgery to close that up, because he wasn't strong enough to close it off himself," Phyllis said.

With drugs such as steroids and surfactant still in the experimental stages — those have done a great deal in recent years to enhance lung development in preemies — Ryan's air sacs did not expand correctly. That made it virtually impossible for him to inhale and exhale on his own.

Ryan, who spent the first 11 months of his life in the Beaumont NICU, was on a respirator for half of that time. Eventually, doctors had to perform a tracheostomy to help the micropreemie breathe. (Del said Ryan was one of the hospital's first babies to receive that procedure.)

Even after he came home, Ryan needed to use the tracheal tube until May 1988 and a nasal cannula for another six months. It was pure bleakness, although the Sellers never relinquished hope.

## Turnaround

"We never gave up, but one of the doctors did," Del said. "He met us in the hall and basically told us it was over, and that Ryan wouldn't make it through the night."

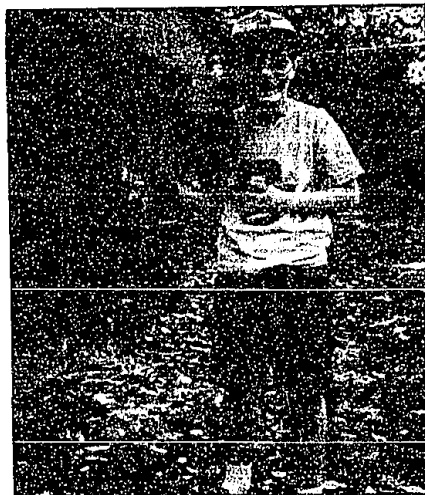
Phyllis said Ryan finally turned the corner because of two developments: the hospital implemented primary care nursing; Ryan was allowed to leave the NICU environment — where he kept getting infections — and convalesce at home.

Regarding the nursing care, the Sellers had had concerns because the hospital's previous arrangement changed the staff every eight hours. "They never got to know him," Phyllis said.

But after the hospital switched to primary care for the NICU, Ryan and nurses Teresa Frye and Kathy Kane were almost inseparable.

"It's a real confusing time for a mom to have a baby and never bring the baby home," Phyllis continued. "But we were happy that they spent all that time with him. It worked out fabulous. Ryan wouldn't be here today."

During his long hospital stint, the Sellers regularly attended a support group for parents of preemies. Going to those meetings



Winning attitude: When Ryan Sellers isn't in school at Scotch Elementary in West Bloomfield, he's having a good time shooting baskets or working with Legos.

helped them learn to get past insensitive comments made by people they knew.

"Nobody understands what you're going through at that point," Phyllis said. "People say, 'You know, don't worry if something happens. You can have another one.' They don't know what you're going through, they're just trying to be empathetic."

"And your emotions, you're riding the roller coaster. One day's a good day, one day's a bad day."

## Common ground

According to Del, the couple lost some friends because of Ryan's fragile health during the first years he was home.

"When we brought him home he was so sick that the doctors told us not to have small children over," he said. "And we had to tell some friends they could come over, but not to bring their children. They couldn't understand

it. Real friends would have understood."

They found new friends, other parents from the NICU or through the support group.

What these friends helped them remember was that other people are going through the same kinds of crises.

And that not everyone is as fortunate as they are.

"He's doing pretty good," Del said. "He's different in some ways but everyone is. He's doing OK. I think better every year."

For that, the couple must take some of the credit. Their hard work on behalf of Ryan continues, doing whatever they can to push their son along to the next level of achievement.

"It doesn't stop when they get home, it's every day," Mr. Sellers said. " . . . But whenever I feel sorry for myself, I just take a walk through Children's Hospital."

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