

# Miracles & Medicine

By: Mariwyn McPherson Webb

***Tiny 'baby miracle boys' are now six months old*** and flourishing. Although still in a Dallas NICU, these conjoined twins are not only a rarity, but also a miracle.

Amarillo native, Dr. Jeffrey Cone is a Craniofacial Pediatric Plastic surgeon and part of an amazing Dallas surgical team that performed a successful surgery separating the conjoined boys.

Cone, a 1998 Tascosa High School graduate, is currently completing a Fellowship in Craniofacial Pediatric Plastic surgery at Medical City in Dallas. There are six surgeons in this group, making it one of the largest group of Pediatric Plastic surgeons in the world. "It is an area of surgery that is at the extreme of what is possible," Cone said.

After an Arkansas couple was told that their unborn babies were conjoined twins, they were also told that the boys' situation was not compatible with life and that there was virtually 'no hope.' Because terminating the pregnancy was a complicated procedure, the Ezell's traveled to Dallas to seek advice from a high-risk specialist. "This specialist is a part of the Pediatric team at Medical City, and he replied that it might not be as dire as it seemed. He suggested

some additional imaging - giving the family reason to hope," Cone remembered.

The twins were connected from the bottom of the rib cage down to the pubic bone and were facing each other. "This is extremely rare and in the seventeen years my fellowship has existed, not a single other fellow has been involved with a conjoined case," he continued.

Next came a referral and visit to an exceptional group of pediatric surgeons with a tremendous amount of experience with abdominal reconstruction. Many tests later, it was determined that there was indeed a chance for the babies to be delivered and separated.

Key groups were involved and included neonatal intensivist, GI and kidney doctors, pediatric surgeons, pediatric plastic surgeons, surgical technicians, pharmacists, and several surgical and medical coordinators.

Regarding surgery, the pediatric surgeons had the biggest challenge of separating the boys and were on their feet and in the operating room for more than nine hours.

"We were prepared for a day or more of operating in total, depending on what anatomy was encountered and what problems may occur. But what is so fun about plastic surgery is that it is not a set of procedures, but a set of tools," said Cone.



Cone and his fellow surgeon, Dr. Hobar, were asked early on to join in the planning. "Once you separate them, there will be no abdominal wall. You are looking at abdominal organs. There was no skin, fascia or muscles that would normally be there. The babies would not have been able to survive if they didn't have a covering for the organs, and that was our role. It was really a thrilling problem to be given because there is so little written about it. A reconstructive plan required originality. We borrowed from some related fields in order to reconstruct their abdomens, he recounted.

The amount of surgical preparation was exceptional. Two operating tables were set up in the same operating room. There were two complete surgical teams and two anesthesia teams – as many as eight surgeons working at the same time. A great deal of time was spent in just controlling the story as it was unfolding inside the hospital. The intention was to keep the news of the twins private. The sobering fact was that the chances were high that one or even both of the babies might not survive the procedure. The conjoined babies' combined birth weight was just more than twelve pounds and the surgery took place at about seven weeks.

"Once the pediatric surgeons finished their work, they took a well deserved break and Dr. Hobar and I began our work. It was a very reverent situation, with the stakes being extremely high. We felt incredible hope and relief at the end of the surgery, because the boys had tolerated the surgery well," he said.

The post surgery has not been without its challenges and now the six-month old-independent boys still require intensive care. The family is remarkable, and this has been quite a spiritual journey as well as a surgical one.

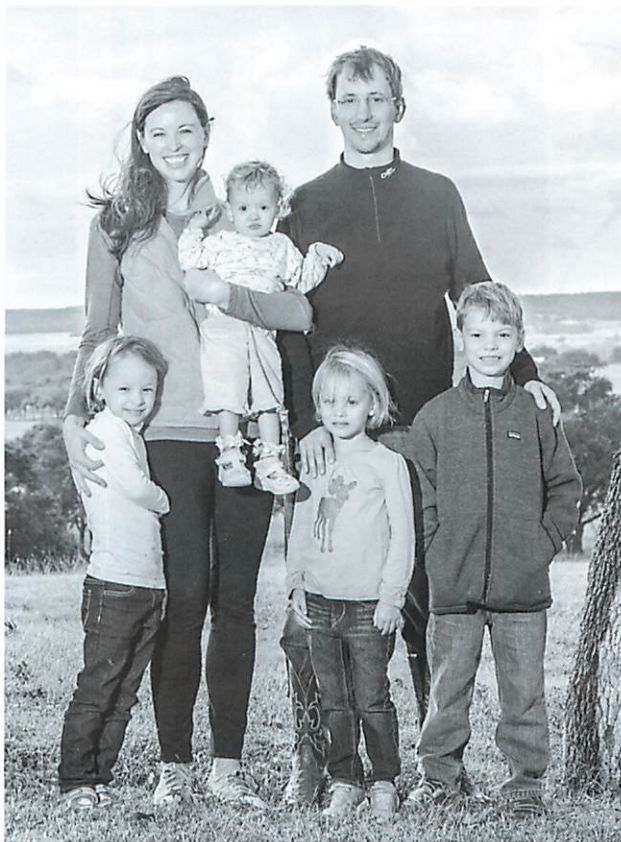
The twins are developing their own individual personalities and the family hopes to take them home as soon as possible. Their mom has written an interesting blog detailing the complete journey (<http://theezelltwins.weebly.com/blog.html>)," he offered. Little Owen and Emmett recently celebrated a festive Christmas in the hospital, complete with a tree and lots of gifts from Santa.

"For me, it was so rewarding because you have such a sense of

purpose. You have rehearsed all the movements and techniques. It makes me want to be a part of similarly challenging procedures.

**'Thoraco-omphalopagus'** is the medical term for conjoined and means that the chest and abdomen are connected.

Getting to know the parents and understand their motivations and incredible fighting spirits has been a deep joy. Addressing such a clear need, it is so fulfilling," said the young Dr. Cone.



*Dr. Jeffrey Cone and his family*

Cone finishes his Fellowship in July and he and his wife, Mary Kat, and their four children will move to Austin, where he and Dr. Hobar will start a Craniofacial center. "We will be working through a number of different hospitals and through the Leap Foundation, which was founded by Dr. Hobar in 1991. Currently we go around the world to a number of different countries to do pediatric surgery. Cleft lip and palate surgery is the biggest part of what we do. We recently returned from Haiti and will soon travel to India. A great thing about this foundation is that there have been some very generous donors that enable us to fly some patients to the United States for surgery. Just a month ago we flew a little Haitian girl to us, and repaired an encephalocele – a large mass that grew from between her eyes. This Foundation is a sizeable

one and I am blessed to be joining this family of practitioners. These trips are a key part of what I want to do going forward. There is such a great need in the world and the Leap Foundation is really unique because of its experience and for its continuity of care," he said.

*"Technically speaking, the most challenging part is separating the organs, repairing the organs and valves."*

*Cone is the son of Amarillo neurosurgeon, Dr. Jeffrey Cone and Deborah*

*Cone and credits them both for encouraging him to pursue his passions.*