

Surviving A Double Tragedy

ONE MOM OVERCOMES TREMENDOUS LOSS AND HELPS OTHERS

BY KATE HOGAN

On the evening of Friday October 14, 1988, Sabrina and Eric Umstead were living in their apartment in Brooklyn, New York. It was the start of a long holiday weekend and the couple had promising plans ahead of them. The next day, they were to travel to New Rochelle to look for a new home. They both wanted less of a commute for when their son, "Little E", arrived in February. As they sat in their kitchen and pored over the details of their insurance coverage, Sabrina grew tired and decided to go to bed. Eric decided to stay up to watch some of the World Series. As she went to bed, Eric said, "We can deal with all this stuff tomorrow." Unfortunately, tomorrow never came. The next thing Sabrina remembers is waking up in a hospital three days later.

Police and fire records indicate that two EMS workers pulled two victims, a man and a pregnant woman, from the third floor apartment of a burning building. Both were unconscious and without a pulse. They were resuscitated and transferred to a local hospital where they were placed in a hyperbaric chamber and treated for smoke inhalation. Those two victims were Sabrina and Eric Umstead.

Because Sabrina was five months pregnant and the baby had surely suffered oxygen deprivation, the doctors felt that terminating the pregnancy was the most prudent thing to do. Sabrina's mother, Mattie Gore, would not allow it. When Sabrina finally awoke, three days later, it was her mother who recounted all the horrid details, including the information that her husband was still unconscious, despite the



Sabrina Umstead Smith

efforts of two hyperbaric chamber treatments. Eric died a month later.

Despite her tremendous grief, Sabrina needed to prepare for the birth of her son, a child who would most likely be born with severe medical disabilities. But Sabrina "didn't want to think about that, couldn't think about that." After a successful C-section birth, the first few hours of Erick's life were

wonderful. But when it came time to feed him, he was unable to suck. The nurses took him away and that is when numerous problems were discovered, the most prominent being underdeveloped lungs and cerebral palsy.

Erick's lungs were not developed and he had to be transferred to Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx so a trachea could be implanted. After a month in the hospital, Erick was allowed to go home, but only with constant nursing care and the promise to move closer to a pediatric hospital. Since Sabrina's mother lived in Philadelphia, they moved south to be near the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Over the course of the next two and a half years, Sabrina's home was constantly occupied by nurses, occupational, physical and speech therapists. In addition to coordinating all of Erick's immense medical needs, Sabrina worked full time to support her son and keep her insurance coverage. Sabrina was exhausted. After Erick's second aspiration (a dangerous inhaling of food into the airway), doctors at CHOP suggested it was time to move him to a full time facility. The suggestion was devas-

tating to Sabrina. After visiting Voorhees Pediatric Facility, Sabrina felt good about the decision and Erick thrived for the next several months.

The afternoon of July 9, 1992 changed everything. "I got a call at work that afternoon. Erick had aspirated for the third time. Since I had not driven to work that day, I had to take the bus home, get my car and drive over the bridge to Voorhees. When I got there, I went to sit with Erick. As I was comforting him, he coded. The doctors came rushing in and quickly got me out of the room. As I waited, I stared out a big picture window. After what seemed like forever, I saw a flash of white light travel from one end of the sky to the other. A moment later, the doctor came out to tell me that Erick was gone."

For the next several years, Sabrina mourned the deaths of her son and husband and sought out psychiatric help. In 2006, in response to her therapy, Sabrina, who now lives in South Jersey, decided to sponsor a scholarship in her son Erick's honor. The following year, The Erick J. Umstead Memorial Foundation (TEJUMF) was started. The foundation serves chronically ill children and their caregivers. "There are some parents that need a lot of help," says Sabrina. The foundation makes charitable donations through three programs: My PJ's, Caregivers Count and the Scholarship Program. More information about TEJUMF can be found at www.ericksplace.org.

"I want to give parents hope. You are stronger than you know. Your child is a light that ignites you so that you can ignite others. One light can illuminate the whole world. Don't hide these children. Let the world see how bright and special they are!"*



Save the Date!

The 2011 South Jersey MOM Conference for Parents

will take place on Sunday, March 20, 2011 at The Mansion in Voorhees.

Visit www.sjmomparentconference.com often for updates!

