

Amazing Grace

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FROM A ROADSIDE IN RURAL CHINA TO THE HEART OF A MISSISSIPPI FAMILY, THE JOURNEY OF ANNA GRACE DAVIS IS JUST BEGINNING.

BY RUTH ANN HENSLEY

Draped in a luxurious feather boa, crowned with a silver jeweled tiara and daintily sipping tea as if the Queen Mother herself had instructed her, a young girl charms her admiring subjects. With a dramatic sweep of her hand and a prim toss of her head, she brushes back the regal, dark locks that cascade to her waist and instructs her court to “Drink more tea!” Her guests might assume that they’re in the company of the heir apparent to a throne. Except that the boa is made from chicken feathers dyed purple, the crown is plastic, and the 5-year-old sipping imaginary tea has already won more battles than most royals have fought in a lifetime.

Anna Grace Davis was abandoned on the roadside of a rural community in southern China when she was only a day old. What may seem like a cruel deed may in fact have been the very act of kindness that set off a miraculous chain of events that has inspired, delighted and amazed people from Memphis to Malaysia. The kindness, divine coincidence and incredible family support that have guided her life are proof that true princesses are made, not born. Anna Grace doesn’t require sovereign rights to a kingdom because her feisty charm has free reign over the hearts of everyone she meets.

The long and winding road

“We bonded immediately,” says her dad, Greg Davis, as he recalls holding Anna Grace in his arms the evening he

and his wife, Nancy, stood in the Chinese consulate’s office to finalize the adoption that had taken 22 months to complete. “There were seven couples with seven new babies in that office; six of the seven babies were screaming at the top of their lungs, and Anna had her head nuzzled right here in my neck,” he says, tilting his head to the side.

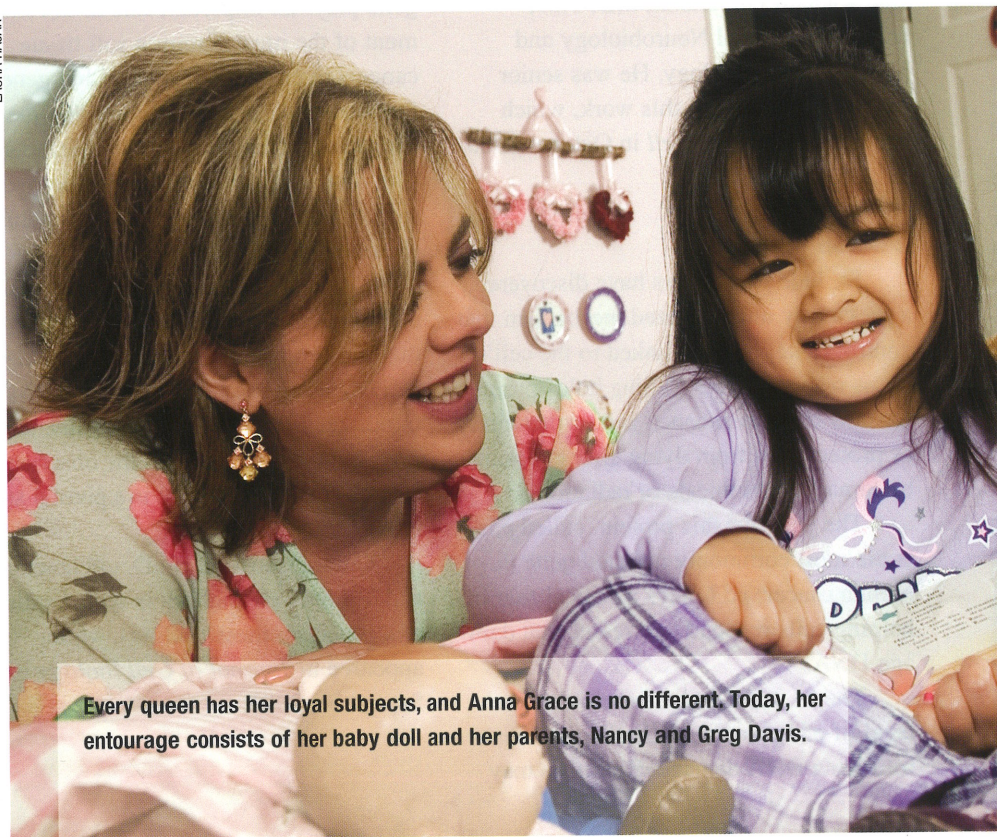
A rare blood disease that nearly took Nancy’s life in 1994 had led the couple to consider adoption when they decided to enlarge their family. Their biological son, Colton, was 8 years old when Anna Grace was adopted from an orphanage in Le Chang, China, where she was taken after being found on the roadside. In addition to dealing with the blood disorder, the

family has dealt with a heart disease that has subjected Colton to four open-heart surgeries.

After weathering life-threatening storms of poor health and enduring months of frustrating international adoption delays, Greg and Nancy were ready to begin a new chapter in their lives the day they walked out of the consulate’s office.

But less than a week after their arrival home, the couple began to notice a change in Anna Grace. “We thought she had an ear infection,” Greg says. It turns out she did have an infection in both ears. But Anna was also losing the ability to sit up on her own, and one of her eyes had begun wandering inward. “Even though

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Every queen has her loyal subjects, and Anna Grace is no different. Today, her entourage consists of her baby doll and her parents, Nancy and Greg Davis.



her ears were getting better, she was not,” Nancy says.

A pediatric ophthalmologist who examined Anna Grace indicated the eye problem might correct itself. But when the baby became less steady and began vomiting, the couple rushed her back to the pediatrician. This time the pediatrician ordered a CAT scan. By that point, Anna Grace couldn’t sit up at all.

“We were driving home after the CAT scan and the pediatrician called us,” Nancy recalls. “The pediatrician said, ‘Where are you right now?’ Greg

said, ‘We’re driving down the interstate.’ And he said, ‘Well, you’d better pull over.’”

The faith factor

The CAT scan had revealed an orange-sized medulloblastoma tumor on Anna Grace’s brain stem. The Davis family didn’t go home that day; they immediately turned around and went back to the hospital, where Anna Grace underwent surgery to remove the malignant brain tumor.

"The first words out of the neurosurgeon's mouth were, 'This is every parent's worst nightmare,'" Nancy says. It wasn't a line they expected to read in the new chapter of their life, but the family pulled together.

"We've faced challenges before, and we've learned that what happens inside of you is far more important than what happens to you," Greg says. "The greatest expression of faith is to keep on going when you don't have all the answers, when you don't understand God's plan."

"We have a saying in our family," Nancy says. "You can get bitter, or you can get better." So the Davises decided they were going to get better.

Anna Grace survived the complex, life-threatening brain surgery and was referred to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, where the 13-month-old began 16 months of chemotherapy and a procedure called conformal radiation. This form of radiation is a precise treatment that sends radiation beams from several directions directly onto the brain tumor, killing it and sparing the rest of the brain from most of the harmful effects of radiation. St. Jude pioneered the use of this therapy in protocols for children with brain tumors.

"There were pages, typewritten pages, of the possible negative side effects of the treatment," Greg says, "ranging from mild to don't-even-talk-about-it."

Saving grace

Not only did Anna Grace survive, but she thrived. She gained 12 pounds while she was in treatment. And most amazing of all, outside of hair loss, she suffered no ill side effects.

"And she did bald really well," Nancy says of her fashion-conscious daughter.

"Yeah, she had about a hundred hats," Greg says with a laugh.

For an infant to survive brain surgery and such an aggressive round of treatments with virtually no side effects such as loss of motor skills, hearing loss and speech impediments, is extremely rare.

"She really is the poster child for our treatment efforts," says Maryam Fouladi, MD, of St. Jude Hematology-Oncology, who monitored Anna's case throughout her treatments and sees her every six months for checkups.

"Anna is the best of both worlds—she is cured of her disease, and she's functionally normal," Fouladi says. "Not only does that give faith and hope to other families, but it gives us, as doctors, hope that we're making some strides in moving toward that goal."

"It's been a joy to watch her grow up," says Jana Freeman, a clinical research associate in Hematology-Oncology. Freeman and the Davis family maintain a friendship that formed during Anna's treatments. "We are so grateful for stories like this," Freeman says.

The Davises are grateful, too, for the support of the St. Jude staff. "I can't imagine going through what we went through with our daughter anywhere else," Nancy says. "It's an amazing place."

Greg agrees. "These doctors are here for way more than a paycheck," he says. "It's a life mission. It's a calling for them to be here."

Greg would know about that sort of thing, since he's the pastor of a church. He says prayers from around the world, the decision to take things one day at a time and faith in God's plan brought their family together and made them stronger.

"I don't know what Anna Grace is going to do in life. But I do know that God went to an extreme amount of trouble to get her out of China, to get her here and to get her well," he says.

Anna Grace's physician says that if the child had not been left on the roadside and adopted by the Davis family, she would not have survived her cancer.

"She wouldn't have lasted another month," says Fouladi, who describes the Davis family as phenomenal. "It's interesting that her middle name should be Grace," Fouladi continues, "because that's what she is." ●



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Even as a toddler undergoing treatment, Anna Grace stole the hearts of St. Jude staff. "Truly, she's precious," says Maryam Fouladi, MD, of St. Jude Hematology-Oncology. "Everyone in the clinic is so thrilled when Anna Grace comes because she's always got a new act or a new cheer to share with us. She's such an inspiration."