

## A Difficult Beginning Yields Joyous Results

Helena's pretty young face lights up in front of cameras. "She loves having her picture taken," her mother Anna says, smiling lovingly at the 6-year-old girl. "Helena is a wonderful dancer . . . she studies at a special school for artistically inclined children where they teach singing, drawing, and dancing. She has also been studying English for two years and is learning the language quite well," Anna



PHOTO: KATHRYN UJAN

Anna smiles down at her 6-year-old daughter, Helena, who was one of the first tiny newborns treated according to Western protocols introduced at the L'viv Regional Neonatal Center through the efforts of AIHA's L'viv/Detroit partnership.

continues proudly. "She is like a gift to her father and me." A gift made even more precious by the fact that the child came a hair's breadth from death soon after she was born.

"I remember everything leading up to Helena's birth," Anna says quietly. "It started on October 6—that's my own birthday—at six in the morning. I was taken to a maternity house in L'viv immediately but, because I was only 27 weeks into the pregnancy, the doctors there tried to delay the birth with a variety of medications. They wanted to give the baby more time to develop." After two days, however, the physicians could do no more to impede the birth.

"When she was born, Helena weighed only 900 grams and was just 33 centimeters long," Anna explains, noting that the local maternity house was not equipped to handle infants with very low weights and the severe complications that so often accompany premature births. The decision was made to transport the tiny newborn to the L'viv Regional Neonatal Center—at that time called the Unit for Sick Infants and Premature Babies at the L'viv Oblast Clinical Hospital—which was the only facility in the area with the capability of treating such a critical case.

Helena was very weak and quickly developed a host of physical problems ranging from respiratory distress and apnea to infections and difficulties stemming from her inability to nurse. "It is a terrible thing to witness your own child struggling for her life . . . but the staff here explained everything to us in great detail. They never gave us false hopes and always told us the truth about what Helena's chances were," Anna says.

Over the course of the six weeks Helena stayed at the Center, the physicians and nurses painstakingly taught the tiny baby how to nurse—first from a tube, then a bottle, and later her mother's breast. Slowly, she began to gain weight until, finally, her mother and father were able to take her home. "Helena weighed two-and-a-half kilos when she was discharged and looking at her now, no one would ever believe she weighed so little at birth," Anna beams, noting that the caring attitude of the Center's staff did not end there. "The doctors gave us very detailed instructions on how to look after Helena once we brought her home and, as you can see, there are no problems with her growth and development—she caught up within two years."

Just like many girls her age, Helena says she loves playing with dolls and gives each one of them a special name. . . . One is called Anna in honor of her mother; another is named Jasmine after the character in the cartoon *Aladdin*, she explains shyly. Anna laughs and ruffles the little girl's hair. "She is a beautiful child and I owe her life to the doctors here. I would

Improving the survival rate of newborns is the underlying goal of AIHA's neonatal resuscitation program and the driving force behind the dedicated medical professionals who act as trainers at the 12 Neonatal Resuscitation Training Centers (NRTCs) established in the NIS through the efforts of AIHA partnerships. Since the program's inception, some 15,000 healthcare professionals received practitioner training at these Centers and more than 155 instructors were trained between 1997 and 2001. In L'viv, Ukraine, and surrounding areas, the survival rate of Very Low Birth Weight (VLBW) infants increased by more than 12 percent during the first year of operation of the NRTC. This is the story of one of these babies—now a bright and healthy 6-year-old; the story of the physician who helped save her life is on the other side.\*

love to have another baby and dearly hope that the pregnancy and birth would run a normal course . . . but if something were to go wrong, I am certain that the staff here would do everything in their power to ensure that baby received the best possible treatment."

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