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Tony and Lindsay Claus show their joy as their daughter, Vivian Yvonne, survives her premature birth recently in Wichita. Courtesy photo

Daughter's premature birth prompts deep gratitude

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Like most people, Tony and Lindsay Claus of Liberal have many reasons to feel gratitude as Thanksgiving approaches. But what they're most thankful for comes down to a two-pound person named Vivian Yvonne.

Born considerably far ahead of her Dec. 31 delivery date, the couple's daughter arrived early out of necessity, Tony said: "Dr. Knudsen was watching Lindsay's blood pressure, and he'd told us, very calmly, that we might need to deliver the baby early. So it didn't come to us as a surprise, because he'd done a great job of preparing us for the possibility."

Lindsay was hospitalized in Liberal for a few days so the medical team could keep a close eye on her condition, and that of the couple's baby. Both Tony and Lindsay, teachers for USD 480, were able to make preparations with their principals and coworkers. When the call came to Tony at Liberal High School, where he teaches vocal music, "I already had my bag packed and ready," he said. "I was out the door and on the highway to Wichita within an hour."

Lindsay had already been transported by air to a Wichita hospital, so Tony had to log four hours of highway driving in a state of suspense.

"It was the longest drive of my entire life," he said. "All the way there, the only thought in my mind was, 'Is my wife going to be OK? Is our baby going to be OK?'"

When he arrived, Tony said, he walked into a scene that was strangely serene.

"I found a parking spot right outside the door. I went into the hospital and found my way to her room without any delays. Just after I got there, they started inducing labor, and pretty soon it was time," he said. Because they'd expected more time to prepare, the couple hadn't completed childbirth training classes, Tony said. In the end, it didn't matter.

"It was so simple. A few pushes, and Vivian was here," he said.

Though the primary concern was health and safety for mother and child, Tony found time to marvel at his daughter's tiny perfection.

"She has fingernails," he said. "They're so small, you look at them and think, 'That's only got to

be few molecules making that fingernail,' and you could never paint them, they're too tiny ... but there they are."

At just around two pounds, Vivian is a hand-sized daughter whose skin is so fragile, Tony said, "it's scary to touch her." Even so, as is standard for premature babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, Lindsay is able to spend time "skin to skin" with her daughter each day, which stimulates Yvonne's physical health and the bond between mother and child.

That is not the only parent-child connection the family draw upon. In what Tony describes as a providential turn of events, Lindsay's mother arrived from Wisconsin a day earlier than she'd originally planned.

"As things began to happen, Lindsay said, 'I really wish my mother was here,'" Tony recalled. "My mother-in-law had already purchased a plane ticket, but when she called the airline, they were willing to give her a ticket a day early, so she got to Wichita sooner than we expected."

Now, two mother-daughter duos spanning three generations are settled in on the hospital grounds. Lindsay and her mother stay at the Ronald McDonald house adjacent to the hospital, which allows both women free lodging and easy access to Vivian. Because only parents are allowed continual access to the NICU, Vivian's grandmother has to wait for scheduled visiting hours. That isn't a problem, said Tony, because it means so much to Lindsay to have her mother with her. Along with the physical recovery Lindsay needs — "her blood pressure is back where we want it to be," Tony said — the women are making headway in gathering what's needed to welcome a new baby into the world.

"We thought we had more time, so we hadn't gotten everything together yet," Tony said. "But it was pretty amazing, when I look back on the last few weeks, how many people were in just the right place at the right time."

One example he listed: when she was hospitalized in Liberal, early in this premature-birth odyssey, Lindsay saw a newspaper ad for an estate sale. She recognized a bedroom furniture set just like one she'd had as a girl. On her instructions, Tony left the hospital, attended the sale, and won the bid for the furniture. Only later did the fact register that he'd purchased items from the estate of Dr. Norvan Harris, the longtime obstetrician in Liberal who delivered

thousands of babies during his career.

“It’s kind of neat,” Tony said. “And now Lindsay and her mom are getting all the other baby things ready while we wait for Vivian to grow.”

Tony returned to work at LHS last week, just in time to help run auditions for the high school musical and continue preparations for the vocal music Christmas concert. He checks in with Lindsay and Vivian by text message and phone calls, and goes home to the couple’s pets in the evening.

“It helps to have them around,” he said, though a dog and two cats are nothing compared to a wife and daughter. “It feels pretty empty at home.”

Each week, he’s able to take Friday off work and head to Wichita for three days of family time.

“It’s hard to be away from them, but I’m glad my job is able to give me more time on weekends,” he said, noting the district has been “incredibly supportive” of the couple’s situation. “We’re all very thankful for that.”

It’s typical for premature babies to remain in the NICU at least until the original due date arrives. Because Vivian is so small and young, her body is still getting the knack of some functions that would be automatic for a full-term newborn. She “forgets” to breathe at times, Tony said, so the NICU provides a breathing reminder, a small puff of oxygen-rich air to stimulate her to take a breath when she becomes too restive. Despite her diminutive size and need to develop, though, the Claus baby is a survivor, said her father.

“She’s feisty, she’s strong,” he said. “You can already see her personality.” When he describes the child who arrived early, it’s easy to hear a father’s affection and fierce loyalty in his rumbly voice.

This Thanksgiving, he said, will be absolutely different than any other he's experienced. Instead of traveling west to Syracuse, where the couple traditionally spends the holiday with extended family, he will drive east to Wichita. Tony expects family members will join the couple and his mother-in-law at the Ronald McDonald House, but the focus will be on Vivian rather than menu plans and table settings.

"Well, we haven't really thought about the food part of it," he said with a laugh. "We know we'll be in Wichita. That's all. We'll figure out the rest later."

For now, he said, thankfulness for his wife and daughter are the main things on Tony Claus' mind.

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