

Meghan VanDyke knew her pregnancy may not be typical. She suffers from lupus and with her doctors was closely monitoring her progress. But, she never thought she would have her baby at just 23 weeks along.

But, when she started bleeding, that's just what happened.

"Honestly I feel naive looking back now, I had no idea that that could happen," said Meghan. "I had no idea that you could have a baby that early or what it would look like or what our journey would entail, and how frequently it actually happens to people."

Meghan and her husband Jeremi rushed to OSF HealthCare St. Joseph medical center, where they learned that Meghan had suffered a placental abruption and required an OSF Life Flight to OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria.

The prognosis for their unborn child was bleak.

"It's very sobering to wake up and learn that your child has about a 6 percent chance of living tomorrow," recalled Jeremi

As soon as the VanDykes hit the hospital doors in Peoria, the decision was made. Their baby was coming into the world via emergency cesarean section, despite the fact that Meghan was just 23 weeks along.

"I was terrified," said Meghan. "When we were leaving Bloomington, they said things were going to move fast, but it didn't click for me that, ok, when we get there you're having a baby."

Jeremi describes the moments after his daughter's birth.

"About 30 seconds after Dr. Clark cleared airways for the intubation to happen and things, she came over and said, 'Congratulations Jeremi. You're the proud father of a little baby girl, do you have a name?' and I kind of just looked at her and started bawling. I said, 'Really? I'm 23 weeks into this. We're arguing over names. We're not even close to that yet,'" he said.

The VanDykes settled on the name Kyli. From that moment on, the 14 ounce baby girl started her fight to survive. It was a series of ups and downs in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, but Kyli was ready for the challenge.

"She just had so much life to her, which was awesome because with everything that she went through, she wouldn't have gotten through it if she's just laid back and not fought like she did, so it was incredible," said Meghan.

Over the months, as Kyli got stronger, both Meghan and Jeremi starting to learn more about themselves as they spent time at the OSF Children's Hospital NICU.

"That's where I learned to be a mother." reflected Meghan. "I learned to fight for my child and to ask questions, but all of the nurses, all of the doctors, everybody that was there taking care of us really did a great job of making sure that we were comfortable, of answering the questions. They knew we were frustrated and they did what they could to be there for us."

Jeremi, meanwhile says the experience not only gave him a miracle baby, but a higher purpose in life. He has since walked away from a career in food service and is currently nursing student at Heartland Community College, pursuing a new career as a Neonatal Nurse Practitioner.

"It took about four to six weeks of being in that hospital, and I pretty much knew. I pretty much thought, I could do this," he said.

Kyli is now a thriving two year old with a personality as big as her will to fight. Her perseverance has proven contagious, and her parents are ready to take any challenge on head first, with Kyli leading the way.

"We're not yet walking, and we're just kind of babbling now, but she's got so much personality she makes up for everything, and she talks to you through her facial expressions, and she's just a joy to be around," Meghan said.

Added Jeremi, "I'm very thankful and I don't think about what could have been, or what's going to be. I'm more thankful that we've been able to raise her as easily as we have all things considered."

The Neonatology program at OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois has been ranked 49th best in the nation by US News and World Report. This December, the NICU it is celebrating its 75th year of operation, helping families stay whole, and giving our most vulnerable a fighting chance for more than seven decades.