



## Choosing Joy

Abigail Elizabeth Joy Leach

We first walked through the doors of the Ronald McDonald House on October 26, 2010. Our newborn daughter, Abigail Elizabeth Joy, had just been diagnosed with an extremely rare genetic disorder called Cerebrocostomandibular Syndrome that affects the ribs, spine, and lower jaw. Because of an extremely small airway and lungs that wouldn't be able to grow properly, Abby had to have an emergency tracheostomy and was ventilator-dependent. The odds were stacked against her, but Abby was born a fighter.



Absolutely devastated, we were feeling emotionally, physically, and spiritually drained. The hospital had generously let us stay two additional days after my discharge so that we could stay close to Abby, but our time there had come to an end. We had nowhere else to go that would allow us to be near our daughter. Then we got the call from the Ronald McDonald House saying they had a room for us.

From the moment we were greeted by the smiling face of a young resident and looked around at the house with cheery yellow walls covered with photographs, we instantly felt a peace fall over us.

**After five emotional weeks of being hospitalized trying to keep my daughter from being born too early, after four terrifying days of not knowing if Abby would make it another night, after six frantic hours of searching the internet trying to find a place close by to stay that night, we were finally “home.”**

Our troubles were far from over, but the Ronald McDonald House made it so much more bearable. The amazing meals made by volunteers meant that we could quickly eat before heading to the hospital. The proximity to UMMC allowed us to walk there, coming and going as we pleased. Nightly activities, a big playroom, and a nice playground gave our four year old son Caleb plenty of distractions from the seriousness of Abby's condition.

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We also really enjoyed getting to know other families. It was comforting to know that people would understand why we were teary-eyed, and we felt encouraged hearing about the medical journeys of others. We've made lasting friendships with so many families in similar circumstances. Some of the bravest kids in the world have stayed at the Ronald McDonald House!

But what struck us the most about RMH was the *staff*. The love and compassion that exudes from the staff is—in a word—*beautiful*. Staff members often sat with us at meals, always asking how Abby was doing. We

so appreciated the concern they had for a little girl they'd never even met. We could feel the sincerity in their voices when they asked how we were holding up.

Beating the odds and proving just how much of a fighter she really was, Abby began to grow and develop. We started to learn how to meet Abby's medical needs and worked with case managers to acquire home nursing and medical equipment. The ladies in the office at RMH sent quite a few faxes for me during those weeks!



**Just shy of three months old, Abby came home with us for the very first time on January 18, 2011! It was an emotional day of celebration, and the staff and families we'd come to love at RMH celebrated with us.**

Our story is just beginning as we now embark on a journey of home nursing, therapy, doctors' visits, and many future surgeries. We're taking it one day at a time and thanking God for every day with our Abby Joy. While we never know what tomorrow will bring (it has already brought a helicopter ride and two hospital stays!), we are learning to choose *joy* in every circumstance.

We are so thankful for the love of the staff at RMH. Their encouragement and selflessness has been such an encouragement to us as we have walked this journey. They truly gave us hope during a hopeless time.

