

Neighbor
Barbie
watches over
Amy and her
sons Jack
(front) and
Max at play.

THE ANGEL NEXT DOOR

I'd never met my neighbor
until the day she held my
son's lifeless body in her
arms — and changed the
course of our lives forever

by AMY PATUREL

photographs by JULIA STOTZ

MY SNEAKERS STRUCK the pavement at a steady pace as I ran through the streets of my neighborhood. It was 6 P.M., prime time for people to be returning home from work, but my inner introvert took comfort in the fact that no one driving by would recognize me. Though I'd lived at the same address for more than two years, my neighbors and I, like many suburban dwellers, remained strangers to one another. I knew the people who lived on either side of our house well enough to wave hello, but I wouldn't have been able to pick anyone else on our block out of a lineup. I was busy raising three kids under 4 while pursuing a career I loved. To be honest, I felt as if I didn't have enough time for idle neighborhood chatter.

Suddenly, as I crossed a street, I heard sirens in the distance. Seconds later, a man I'd never seen before slowed his car beside me and yelled out the window, "Amy? Are you...Amy? Please get in the car. There's an issue with your son."

I didn't have to ask which of my three sons he was referring to; I knew it was my 15-month-old, Jack. He was born with a double aortic arch, a defect in which an extra branch stemming from the heart forms a ring around the airway and esophagus, acting something like a vise. Over the past three months, we'd frantically dialed 911 two times, landed in the ER twice and been helicoptered to Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego once. Each time, Jack had been choking.

Six weeks before I left on that evening run, he'd had surgery that successfully divided the ring, but his trachea was still 80% obstructed because it needed time to expand to normal size. As a result, every meal was fraught with fear; I tried giving him purees (he turned up his nose), cut his food into teeny morsels (he screamed for bigger bites) and would often resort to giving him "O" cereal because we had two other mouths to feed, never mind our own!

So, I didn't question this stranger's motives, didn't think twice about jumping into his car. Instead, my mind raced with other thoughts: *Are those sirens for Jack? Is he OK?* I hoped that the sirens meant he was still alive, but I feared the worst.

The man raced the mile to my house as if we were speeding along on the



BONDED FOR LIFE
Barbie, Amy and Jack, who was saved by Barbie's quick action.

autobahn, not on residential streets. I gripped the armrest, praying that we wouldn't careen into a tree, yet still managed to pummel him with questions:

"Is my son OK?"

"What happened?"

"Where are our other boys?"

After his third "I don't know...your husband just asked me to find you" response, I tried to silence my chatter.

When we finally pulled up to our house, I saw my husband, Brandon, on his knees, head on the grass, with a small, shirtless body lying next to him: my Jack.

"Is he gone?" I squeaked, inching my way in beside Jack amidst a sea of unfamiliar faces. My heart was in my throat, and I was shaking.

"Amy? Are you...Amy? Please get in the car. There's an issue with your son." I heard sirens in the distance.

Brandon lifted his head and brought his hands to his face. He couldn't speak. He looked ghost-white. Horrified. Broken.

A stranger, a petite blond with warm eyes and a calming demeanor, stepped up to me. "I didn't think I could save him," she said, "but I did CPR, and I think he's OK."

I later learned that her name was Barbie. She was a registered nurse, and though I'd never seen her before, she lived across the street from us.

Her words hung in the air.

Didn't think she could save him? He had actually been gone? Not breathing? She had brought him back to life?

I reached for her hand and squeezed it, then scooped Jack into my arms and collapsed on the grass, speechless with

the terror of what might have been.

What could I say to the woman who had literally saved my son's life, the woman who hadn't thought she could save my baby but had tried—and done it? Her will, her skill and her breath had brought him back to us.

Within seconds, paramedics, firefighters and the police descended. They worked fast, attaching probes to Jack's skin, drawing blood to assess his blood sugar and taking vitals. But Jack was breathing and his eyes were open. He was warm in my arms. And, despite seeming confused, he was OK.

"Does he always sound like that?" one of the EMTs questioned.

"Yes...like a truck motor," I replied.

Then I heard my husband, still kneeling behind us, speak up: "I was feeding Max and Brian, and then Jack started choking."

Panicked, Brandon had pulled Jack from his chair, flipped him over and pounded on his back just as we'd learned to do in CPR class. *Nothing*. He'd frantically searched the house for a phone. *Nowhere*. Then he'd run out the front door, screaming until his voice was raw and no sound came out. Jack was blue and limp in his arms.

Soon, he told me, it seemed as if the entire neighborhood was on our front lawn asking how they could help, forming a kind of spontaneous block party for which the invitation was my husband's terrified wailing and the →



REAL LIFE *heart-to-heart*

MY THREE SONS

Amy with her husband, Brandon, and their children. Twins Max (left) and Brian (right) are 4; Jack is 2.

guest of honor lay on the ground breathless. I, who had arrived on the scene unfashionably late, received introductions by proxy days later, when Brandon and I finally caught our collective breaths.

One man lived across the street and up a few houses—he was the stranger who had picked me up. His wife had stayed inside our home and distracted our 3-year-old twins during the chaos. Barbie’s husband, Mike, had dialed 911 and then recited a blessing over our baby as he lay dying. And Barbie—well, she had given us the opportunity to see Jack blow out the candles on his second birthday cake.

Until that terrifying day, I hadn’t met any of them. Why? Because I’d subscribed to the modern minivan culture wherein people stay busy inside their homes and offices, escaping from their garages only to shuttle kids to activities.

The “what-ifs” were mind-numbing. What if this nurse hadn’t lived across the street? What if she hadn’t been home? What if Brandon’s bloodcurdling screams hadn’t lured these unassuming saviors out of their houses?

Somehow, Jack’s lifeless body turned strangers into neighbors and neighbors into friends. For months we had Barbie on speed dial, and we rushed Jack to her door three times during choking episodes. While each incident was a false alarm, we bonded during those moments.

Now, just over a year later, Barbie and I like to spend time together watching my boys play in the front yard, swapping war stories about child-rearing (she’s a mom of

four) or going to dinner with our husbands sans kids, reveling in a seemingly ordinary friendship—one I could have enjoyed much sooner if I hadn’t been so reluctant to let new people into my world.

There have been other changes, too. With a little coaxing and a lot of time, Jack’s trachea has expanded to a normal size for a 2-year-old’s. He gobbles down huge bites of chicken, broccoli and mixed nuts (his favorite!) without incident, and Brandon and I are finally able to relax at mealtime. And, perhaps most fittingly, Jack has made several neighborhood friends. He greets strangers with a bold “Hi!”, plays easily with other kids at the nearby park; and calls our gardeners by name, even speaking to them in their native Spanish.

Me? I’m a work in progress. Rather than dodging neighbors I don’t know, I fight my hermit-like tendencies and engage them in conversation. I know most intimately the three neighbors who surround us—and now have their numbers saved on my phone. Occasionally I even issue impromptu party invitations. I’m still intensely private, but I’ve learned the value of forging friendships with the people who surround us.

One day I will tell Jack how close he came to death, how our neighborhood banded together to help us—and how the woman he knows as “Miss Barbie” gave him lifesaving breath. And I will tell him that no matter where life takes him or what he does, he should always make an effort to befriend his neighbors. ♦



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