

9/1/09

Texas teen continues to overcome odds

■ Victim of early childhood trauma excels despite belief he wouldn't live

By DAVID CASSTEVENS
FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

Melonie Caster knows she will become emotional today when her son steps onto the field at Cowboys Stadium.

Her eyes welled in anticipation of that moment.

"For 16 years ... " the mother said.

Caster paused — and gave a little smile — as the words backed up in her throat.

"For 16 years I've been told, 'He'll never' ... 'He can't' ... 'He won't.'"

Yet each day, each year, with each life-affirming achievement, the North Texas teenager keeps proving otherwise.

As an infant, Trae Caster was violently shaken by a baby sitter and left with cerebral palsy, impaired vision and lifelong learning disabilities. Now he's a sophomore at Trinity High School in Euless, which opens its football season this morning against a team from Utah.

Trae, dressed in a black uniform, will perform as a member of his high school marching band.

Trae's vision, his mother said, "comes and goes." He struggles to form words and walks with an uneven gait. But the slender youth clutching a pair of drumsticks is no less a part of the Trinity band than any of its other members — a fact that underscores the school's mission statement.

"We ... strive to educate, respect and recognize all students," it reads in part.

Band director Mario Casanova said he had no qualms about inviting Trae to make music with other students. "We don't know what Trae can or can't do," Casanova said. "He doesn't even know. But whatever he can do, more power to him. He loves music. And he's having a great time."

Tragic day

It was a Tuesday in March 1993.

Trae's mother was at work when she received a phone call at noon.

Her baby sitter, a licensed caregiver, said she had been feeding 11-week-old Trae when he stopped breathing. The sitter called 911. A helicopter rushed the infant to Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth.

When Melonie arrived, Trae — his head swollen — lay in the emergency room.

The baby had retinal hemorrhaging and was having a grand mal seizure.

The frightened mother was ordered to leave the room.

That night an investigator took Melonie aside and told her that Trae had been shaken. Twenty-five to 30 percent of infants with shaken baby syndrome die from their injuries. Symptoms include seizures, comas, vomiting and

breathing difficulties. Those who survive may live in a vegetative state or have other problems, including permanent brain damage, paralysis, blindness, deafness, learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties.

Two days later a neurologist told Melonie and her husband that they faced a decision. Their baby, they were told, was in pain and dying. The parents were urged to consider taking Trae off the ventilator.

Plans were made to unhook the child from life support at 6 a.m.

The mother, her heart aching, held her baby all night.

After the machine was turned off, Trae gasped for breath. He was put back on the ventilator and was weaned off over time. A doctor told Melonie that her son probably wouldn't live a year. The infant remained in the hospital for three months while his parents lived their own nightmare under a cloud of suspicion.

Becoming an advocate

During a civil hearing to terminate the couple's parental rights to Trae, the baby sitter said that she had shaken the child while trying to resuscitate him. She walked out of the courtroom and never faced a criminal charge.

On Christmas Day, shortly before his third birthday, Trae finally took his first steps.

"Doctors told me he was going to make it," Melonie said. "That's when it hit me. The person that did this to him was still walking the street."

Melonie sent her son's medical records to specialists who told her that the severity of the injuries indicated that Trae had been shaken and thrown against a wall or piece of furniture. She took her findings to the Tarrant County's District Attorney's Office only to learn that the three-year statute of limitations for injury to a child had expired.

A state law protected the person who may have abused her son.

"That's why I decided I had to do something."

She became her son's advocate. In 2001 Melonie appeared before the state Senate Criminal Justice Committee. Her testimony led to Trae's Law — legislation that extended the statute of limitations for injury to a child, disabled or elderly person to 10 years. That is the same time afforded for prosecuting sexual abuse of a child.

Gov. Rick Perry appointed her to the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities.

Today, she passionately urges other parents of children with disabilities to educate themselves.

"They need to know that their child can sit in a (regular) classroom," she said, her voice rising. "When professionals say their child can't be in the choir or they don't deserve a spot in the band, they can stand up and say, 'Yes they can.' That is their legal right."