

MAVERICK

Cashana M. Betterly, Class of 2016

I suppose you could say I'm a celebrity around these parts.

People call me the infamous "miracle baby." My mom has posted videos about me and my journey all over the internet. I can't really blame her. It's probably safe to say that most babies aren't born after only spending 23 weeks in their mommy's belly. So, I'll give her that. But if she plans to embarrass me this much during my teen years, we will definitely need an intervention.

I'm also known by many pediatricians around town because of all that I've been through—because I've managed to live despite my health problems. As it turns out, I probably should have stayed in my mommy's belly a little bit longer. I guess you could call me a rebel, an adventurer. I knew there was an awesome world outside waiting for me and I didn't want to wait any longer. That decision didn't come without some consequences though.

I spent the first five months of my life in the hospital with other babies. I think some of them were rebels like me. It wasn't my favorite place, if I'm being honest. They kept poking me and prodding me all over, and constantly waking me up to run tests. I never really knew what was going on. After my journey to the outside world, all I wanted to do was rest. And I thought to myself, "If this is what the outside world is like, take me back to where I was before!" Because, hey, at least the weather was much warmer there. But things gradually got better. And I knew they were only trying to help me, to make my adventure a success. The breathing machines, the medicines for all the bugs in my body, the pokes and prods—they all served a purpose.

And I'm very thankful for that. You know, I often wonder what ever happened to those other babies. I think some of them took journeys to heaven while I was there. I wasn't ready to take that journey, not yet. Some other babies continued their journey here on earth with me. Maybe I'll run into them one day. If we can recognize each other, that is. Chances are, we'll all look a tad different. After all, I'm two-years-old now. I'm almost an adult!

I'm much healthier now. But the biggest thing that bothers me is probably the way my body moves. I can't move in the way that I'd like to. They call it CP, or something like that. Some fancy name that I can't pronounce. Most kids don't have it, but I do. And sometimes I see the other kids run, play, and swim and I get a little sad. There are days I can't even stretch my arms when I wake up in the morning! It's frustrating, to say the least. The upside is that I go to therapy every week and my legs are getting really strong! I'm standing for longer periods of time now and I get to wear fancy footwear to help my feet get stronger too. Who knows? Maybe one day I'll be able to run around the playground with those other kids. Maybe I'll run even faster than them!

The next thing that can be kind of annoying is the way I breathe. Since I was born so early, my lungs never had a chance to grow in the way they were supposed to. So I take medicine every day for them. That, coupled with the fact that my swallowing muscles are kind of weak, make for a pretty tricky way of eating. I have this cool little tube inside of my belly that my mom puts white juice into every day. I must say, they've put some of it in my mouth and it's just not that appetizing. I see the other kids with apple juice, orange juice, yogurt...now

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that's the good stuff. There's a nice lady who's helping me learn how to swallow better and I think she's doing a pretty good job. Pretty soon, I'll be eating those delicious enchiladas that we cook all the time at home.

Oh! That actually leads me to my next point...I don't think I've mentioned the most important part of my adventure yet—my mom. Even though she's 24 now and getting kind of old, she's still the coolest person I know. A lot of kids I know have both a mom and a dad, but she's been raising me all by herself. I think that makes both of us pretty special. My grandma helps take care of me, too, sometimes. She's even older than my mom, which I didn't think was possible, but she is. My mom works hard. She has a job and she goes to school, yet she still manages

to cook wonderful food for the family and spend time with me at the end of the day. And that's always my favorite part of the day.

To wrap things up, according to science, I shouldn't be alive right now. But I'm a maverick. I've been through things during my first 2 years of life that most people will never experience in a lifetime. And this fact has pros and cons. But I'm here now and I'm not going anywhere. Despite my health problems, I know my awesome venture out into the world will be worth all the struggles. I don't regret a thing.

And you know what? The weather out here isn't so bad after all. ■



IN UTERO

Nicole McLaughlin

Nicole McLaughlin is an emerging artist who received her BFA from Florida State University and currently maintains a studio in Key West, Florida. Often times her work grows from looking for mathematical order and structure in nature: specifically in human behavior, evolutionary psychology, cell behavior, and biological imperatives. She exhibits throughout the Southeast.