



Former Mrs. Colorado Emily Stark with daughters Lexi and Sydney, once conjoined twins, separated at 7 months of age.

Hair and make up by
Marietta and Chad Cantu / Rita B Salon

CONNECTED

for Life

by Stephanie Riggs

Photographs by **Ellen Jaskol**

Emily and Jim Stark didn't know the odds stacked against them and their unborn girls. They knew only that they wanted their babies.

Identical twins joined in utero are called conjoined twins, a rare phenomenon that happens once in 200,000 live births. Between 40 percent and 60 percent of conjoined twins are stillborn, and 35 percent survive only a day, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center website. No one knows why 70 percent of conjoined twins are girls or why it even happens, for that matter. One theory suggests that the fertilized egg only partially splits. Another maintains that the egg splits normally but stem cells in one twin seek out similar stem cells in the other, connecting their lives, usually with tragic consequences.

Surgically separating conjoined twins is a risky, delicate, precise procedure. And even though success rates have improved over the years, separating these little lives remains rare. The overall survival rate of conjoined twins is only 5 percent to 25 percent. So when both survive and have no long-term side effects, it's a miracle.

On Aug. 3, 2000, Mrs. Colorado, Emily Stark, heard the news that she and her husband, Jim, had been waiting for: She was pregnant. An ultrasound in November determined she was carrying twins. A week later, her emotional roller-coaster ride began when another ultrasound revealed her twins were conjoined, connected at the base of their spines.

Emily and Jim were told that their babies might not live, and if they did they might never walk. They were asked if they wanted to abort the pregnancy. They both decided they wanted these babies, regardless of the outcome. Doctors weren't sure what to expect. So after interviewing doctors around the world, the couple found themselves right back in Colorado, betting on what they believed was the best medical team in the country.

At the end of February doctors admitted the beauty queen to St. Joseph's Hospital, where she waited for what

seemed like an eternity. The truth is no one really knew what would happen next. Colorado doctors had little experience with conjoined twins.

On March 9, Lexi and Sydney Stark came into the world at 29 weeks and 6 days. A C-section was the only way doctors at Kaiser Permanente in Denver could remove them together. The next day, Sydney needed a colostomy; in May it was Lexi's turn. There were urinary tract and colon investigations to determine the best way to separate the girls. Emily never complained; instead, she celebrated these little lives and prayed that the girls would be OK. The babies endured tissue expansion procedures and staph infections. Day after day, Emily and Jim took deep breaths and did what was needed for their girls.

On Oct. 9, 2001, the extended family, their friends and the rest of the world witnessed a miracle. I was covering this historic journey for the CBS program *48 Hours*. From birth to separation, the world witnessed medical history: a rare successful separation of conjoined twins, the first in Colorado.

Months of planning resulted in a 16-hour surgery performed successfully for the first time in Colorado. A team of 22 doctors from Kaiser Permanente and Children's Hospital dedicated countless hours and many months preparing for a day that would change a family forever. Dr. Brad McDowell, a plastic surgeon, had the tricky task of expanding the babies' skin so he would have enough to close following the separation surgery. Dr. Michael Handler, a pediatric neurosurgeon at Children's, would separate the babies' nerves and bone at the base of the spine, and Dr. Joseph Janik, a pediatric surgeon, would sort out the babies' internal systems.

Following a family prayer, the girls headed into surgery at 7:30 in the morning joined as one, and around 11 that night they were returned to their parents as independent little girls in separate beds. Jim and Emily finally broke down in tears of joy. "I just can't believe the babies I have only held as one are now on their own," Jim said.



Emily was overwhelmed with emotions. “Seven months to the day after their birth, I feel like they were born again. I just want to thank everyone who worked so hard and sacrificed time away from their own families to make my family perfect. Many prayers have been answered.”

Eight days after the surgery the girls went home separately but slept back to back, as they always had. Then the physical therapy began. On March 1 they celebrated their first birthdays. In June they took their first steps and not long after started walking.

A decade later, I asked the girls what they remember about being connected. “I remember my dad leaning over with both of us when he had to pick something up,” Lexi says. “I saw a movie about it once,” Syd says. That’s about all they can recall. At the moment, they are far more concerned that their 4-year-old brother, Andrew, is taking their Webkinz.

Emily and Jim have an appreciation of little steps that most of us take for granted. “You are there for the kids,” Jim says. “It doesn’t matter how you feel, it doesn’t matter if you are having a bad day, you are not the important one

anymore. Things work out when you look at life that way.”

Emily laughs. “I guess I always had faith it would all work out, and I did get my fairy-tale ending after all.”

Watching the girls play, giggle and run around the house with their brother is an answer to untold prayers. The pieces of evidence that these girls were ever connected are tiny scars on their lower spines; Lexi’s is in the shape of an “S” and Syd’s looks like an “L.” Coincidence? I don’t think so, but certainly they are constant reminders of how these two will be connected for life.

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