

Glendale News-Press

The little girl that could

Born with underdeveloped tibias, she joins classmates at school walk-a-thon Saturday.



Olivia Kalindjian, 8 of Glendale, right, participates in a fundraising walk from the Armenian Sisters Academy in Montrose to Crescenta Valley Park in La Crescenta on Saturday, October 14, 2011. Kalindjian was born with tibial hemimelia and she was given no chance to walk in her life. (Raul Roa/Staff Photographer)

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Olivia Kalindjian had to find alternative ways to get around. At 1, she crawled and scooted while other toddlers learned to walk. And during years of corrective surgeries aimed at fixing the severely underdeveloped tibias she was born with, there were stints with braces and walkers.

But on Saturday, supported by nothing more than her two legs, the 8-year-old took to the streets in Montrose for the first Armenian Sisters' Academy walkathon, a fundraiser meant to offset tuition costs for needy students.

“Every time we see her we are amazed at her progress,” said Armine Sherikian, an administrative assistant at Armenian Sisters’ Academy, a small private school on Florencita Drive.

The 4-mile walk was a milestone for Olivia and for her family, who had been told by doctors that amputation was the solution, but who refused to abandon their dreams of seeing her walk.

Born at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, Olivia was the fourth of quadruplets conceived after her parents’ long struggle with infertility. It was immediately apparent that something was wrong with her lower legs and feet, which were pointed inward, but the family hoped it was something that could be fixed.

It wasn’t until an orthopedic doctor visited them the next day to discuss amputation that the gravity of the situation hit them.

“That is really when I had to take a step back,” said Olivia’s mother, Adrine Kalindjian. “That is when the devastation set in.”

They balked at the idea, and eventually connected with Dr. Vernon Tolo at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, who referred them on to Dr. Dror Paley, an orthopedic surgeon famous for his conviction that every limb can be saved.

The family traveled to his office in Maryland, where Paley told the Kalindjians that not only would Olivia be able to walk, she would be able to run.

“I said, ‘So you won’t need to amputate?’” Adrine Kalindjian said. “He said, ‘Why would you amputate two perfect legs?’”

Cautiously optimistic, the family began traveling to the East Coast for treatment, including multiple leg lengthenings and surgeries. Doctors applied a complex framework of rings, rods and wires to both tibias to trigger bone growth. The tibia, also called the shin bone, is the larger of the two bones in the lower leg.

Nine months later, Olivia was handed over to physical therapists to learn how to walk.

“It was wonderful,” Adrine Kalindjian said. “The process wasn’t completely smooth; we had setbacks where her feet would start turning again and we had subsequent surgeries, but that is kind of part of the process.”

For the first time, Olivia was able to wear shoes, and her family threw her a shoe party to mark the occasion.

“She got princess slippers and sandals, and to this day she is the biggest shoes freak — she just loves them,” Adrine Kalindjian said. “Every time I get to paint her toe nails, it is just the most exciting thing for me.”

Challenges await the third-grade student — she will need additional surgeries to further lengthen her tibias as she continues to grow. But the family said they are looking forward to shining moments. She has joined a youth basketball team and hopes to play AYSO soccer in the near future.

Even when recovering from operations, Olivia is always eager to participate in playground games, her third-grade teacher Carolina Chavez said. Once, when she was unable to jump rope herself, she sat on her walker and turned the rope for others.

“She has always been a happy child; no matter what obstacles she [faces] she always has a great outlook on life,” Chavez said.

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