

# Against ALL odds

A brave little boy's journey to the very edge of survival and back says a lot about the power of courage and extraordinary care.

October 23, 2002 was a sunny afternoon in central North Carolina, one of the last warm days of autumn. Tracey Lindley was mowing the lawn of the Burlington home she shares with her family. Her husband, Chuck, was inside, and the couple's two young children were playing in the garage. Then three-year-old Mason, lively and curious, found his way outside—to Mom.

Concentrating on her task, all other sounds masked by the deafening roar of the riding lawnmower's large engine, Tracey didn't sense her son's presence—until she backed over him. "I felt a bump, then I heard a grinding sound," she recalls, her eyes moistening at the memory. "I turned around and looked down and saw Mason's face sticking out from beneath the lawnmower. My first thought was that it had to be a nightmare—I must have passed out."

Chuck, watching in horror from inside, immediately called 911, then rushed out to help. The Lindleys hurriedly worked to lift the lawnmower off their son, not knowing what they'd find beneath. In moments, they had their terrifying answer. "It looked as if a giant cookie cutter had punctured a massive hole in Mason's abdomen," Tracey recalls. "You could literally see the ground through it—everything that should have been there was gone."

Mason never cried during the traumatic event. His only complaint before going into shock was, "Mommy, my tummy hurts."

Paramedics rushed Mason to the local hospital to meet Duke's critical care trauma team. From there, the youngster was airlifted to Duke Children's Hospital & Health Center and rushed into surgery. The fact that he made it to the operating room at all was the first of many miracles.

Mason had suffered extensive damage to several internal organs, six ribs and his left arm. "Mason's pancreas and spleen were so badly injured we had to remove them," recalls Duke pediatric surgeon Henry Rice, MD. "One of his lungs was badly torn and we repaired that. Then we realized that his intestines were practically gone. At that point, we couldn't help wondering: What kept him alive long enough to allow us to save his life?"

Mason not only survived, but quickly grew stronger. Doctors told the family that his treatment and rehabilitation would require many more months of hospitalization. But on December 6, Mason was released from the hospital—just six weeks after his accident and four days before his fourth birthday.

Since then, Mason has undergone more than a dozen surgeries. Scott Levin, MD, chief of plastic surgery at Duke, closed the large hole in Mason's side with tissue relocated from his back. Other procedures have put his arm back together, installed a permanent feeding tube and rerouted his digestive tract to a colostomy bag.

Today, Mason receives regular antibiotics to prevent infection. A nurse whom Tracey considers "practically a member of the family" comes in once a week to check his IV line. But in most respects, he's a normal little boy. He can eat with his family, and loves hot dogs and pasta. Though his body can digest very little from these meals, the total parenteral nutrition (TPN) he receives intravenously every night—and which he'll need for the foreseeable future—provides him with all the essential nutrients his body needs. In fact, he's grown more than a foot in just 16 months.

"Mason's future looks pretty good, because we have such excellent nutritional technology," says Wallace Berman, MD, a member of Duke's pediatric gastroenterology and nutrition team. "Someday he might be a candidate for an intestinal transplant. In the meantime, the fact that he's here, and so many positive things have happened, speaks volumes about the care he's gotten to date."

Mason's progress—especially in light of his initially bleak prognosis—has delighted his medical team every step of the way and touched the hearts of people around the world. He's a fun-loving boy who loves to laugh and make people laugh.

"He's funny, he's confident, and he's never met a stranger," Tracey says. "Ask him who he is, and he'll say, 'My name is Mason Lindley, I've had a lot of surgeries, and I'm the miracle child.' Then he'll get back to playing." Favorite activities include baseball (he wears a special T-shirt to protect his midsection) and playing air guitar (amazingly, his severely damaged left arm has full range of motion). He also enjoys riding his bike, lovingly pestering his adoring big sister, Lizzie, and—since his parents figured out how to make it work with a wetsuit and special tape—swimming. "We're determined to let him be a regular kid," says Tracey.

What began as a parent's nightmare of a beloved child being in the wrong place at the wrong time has evolved into an inspiring story of strength and courage. "Mason is a miracle, and every little step is a miracle," says Tracey. For that gift, she credits both the family's rock-solid religious faith and Mason's Duke doctors, whom she calls incredible. "They're not only brilliant, but they're warm, caring and love Mason like we do."

Both parents are firm in their belief that their son's future, though complicated by the events of that unforgettable day, will be a bright one. "We don't focus on the past—we just keep looking ahead," Chuck says.

"We call the scars on his body 'hero marks,'" Tracey adds. "We want him to know that he's a strong, courageous boy. And we'll do anything we can to help him do anything he wants."

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Tracey Lindley



Mason Lindley takes it easy as he recovers at Duke Children's Hospital & Health Center.



The Lindley family enjoys a Kodak moment with Bill Jordan and Sheri Logan during the Mix 101.5 radiothon for Duke Children's. Mason's story touched many hearts and encouraged listeners to call in their pledges.



Mason, left, adores his sister Lizzie.