

Mother's Day, 2021

Dear Friend,

When Hailey B. is asked what she loves the most about her 16-month-old daughter, Hayden, she quickly replies, "Can I just say everything?"

And, indeed, little Hayden is a joy to behold, with her four perfect front teeth, her huge smile, and her bouncy little ponytail. Seeing her today, we can easily celebrate how hard she worked to accomplish the most basic things, like sitting up, making sounds, and even swallowing food.

Flash back to November 29, 2019. Hailey was about four weeks away from her due date, and she suddenly noticed her baby wasn't as active as usual. A rush to the doctor revealed Hayden's heart was beating erratically and often too slowly, so the baby was immediately delivered by C-Section. It was soon determined that Hayden had global developmental delay -- a severe deficit across a broad range of fine and gross motor skills. She was smaller than 99% of all babies at birth. She had both a lip and tongue tie. Her feet were turned in. She needed oxygen and extra monitoring, but not the NICU. Clearly, this baby was ready to fight for her best life.

"Hayden has so much joy. Her smile lights up any room. She's endlessly curious and resilient and will try over and over again to achieve what she wants until she gets it," says Hailey.

However, in March, just when Hayden would have been receiving vitally important therapies, the world went into quarantine. The feeling of isolation was crushing. Hailey took a hiatus from her job to provide for the social and educational needs of their three-year-old son, Dexter, and keep up with the urgent demands of a very vulnerable baby.

By July of 2020, things opened up a little. Hayden was enrolled in several early intervention programs. Hailey and her husband began to be able to make in-person appointments with experts in occupational therapy, physical therapy, feeding instruction, gastroenterology, neurology, endocrinology, and genetics.

"We routinely see up to nine doctors a week, and it was quite the challenge during COVID when another adult or even a sibling wasn't allowed in the room with us because of social distancing," notes Hailey.

As swallowing continued to be a serious issue, service coordinators connected Hailey with *Friends of Tennessee's Babies with Special Needs* who quickly supplied the essential items Hayden needed at that precise point in her development at no cost and with no red tape.

"*Friends* provided us with a Z Vibe, which is a vibrating feeding utensil that "wakes up" all the muscles a baby with severely low muscle tone needs to eat efficiently. If we hadn't gotten this important tool, Hayden would have had to have a feeding tube – which we wanted to avoid at all costs," says Hailey, with relief. "I don't know what we would have done if we hadn't had the utensil from *Friends* at the exact moment of need."

Friends is composed of a small army of very committed people whose greatest joy is to give critical assistance without delay, because "Babies Can't Wait!"

Since 1995, *Friends* has provided services to young children and babies with special needs in 16 counties in East Tennessee. Priorities include a hearing-aid loaner bank, respite care, family learning days and workshops, an educational library with specific materials and resources, care packages and baby showers for families of premature babies in the NICU, travel assistance for out-of-area medical appointments, diapers, orthopedic shoes, and emergency/family assistance. In addition, *Friends* offers a series of online training modules to help families learn techniques of care and how to manage their child's lifelong financial needs.

"I tried a few groups that hosted moms and typically developing babies. It was hard. No-one wants to admit they compare their child to another's, but we all do. It was painful to watch other kids who were Hayden's age roll over, sit up, smile, and babble while our sweet girl was so far from being able to do any of those things," Hailey admits.

Fortunately, even with the pandemic restrictions, *Friends* found a way to host family events, with a drive-thru Christmas light show by Shadracks, Movie Nights at a local drive-in theater, Zoo Day, Ripley's Aquarium, and an Easter Egg Hunt at Mane Support Horse Farm. As soon as gatherings are safe again, *Friends* will resume a rich roster of other activities, including monthly date nights, a night at a Smokies baseball game, and a huge indoor winter holiday party. These wonderful times of celebration and fellowship provide precious networking opportunities for families who thought they were struggling alone and are amazed to find they are actually members of a powerful community that shares many of the same concerns.

Friends is delighted to embrace Hailey and her family. It's the babies who start out with such steep hills to climb who often end up making the mountains sing. And these transformations are often powered by an exceptional mom. Won't you help us honor Hailey and other moms like her by acknowledging the special people in your life? For every \$10 you give, we will provide a beautiful Mother's Day card for you to honor someone who has nurtured you. Just fill out the enclosed response note, mail it with your gift in the envelope provided, and we will send you a packet with the cards, envelopes, and postage so you can add your personal touch and mail them out to those you love.

Please help us bring moms like Hailey into *Friends*' welcoming circle of care.

Warmest regards,

Chair

Friends of Tennessee's Babies with Special Needs

P.S. A gift of \$100 is about what it takes to buy a Z-Vibe kit and other oral motor tools. These simple, low-tech solutions make a huge difference to a child with feeding issues or a sensory processing disorder. Won't you help us continue to deliver essential equipment like this to many more precious babies? It means so much, and we thank you in advance!