

# Tina Champion Celebrates Medical Miracle



The Champion family poses for a photograph at Tina Champion's 40th birthday Saturday, October 24. Pictured (front, from left) are Olivia Champion, Dalton Champion, Tina Champion, Yvonne Weaver, Chuck Champion, and Kelly Champion.

## By Jonathan Eppley

Tina Champion was born in a military hospital in Anchorage, Alaska, and spent the first few weeks of her life separated from her parents while at hospitals in California and Texas for surgery after surgery. She was diagnosed with two life-threatening birth defects, spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and doctors didn't give her long to live. Tuesday, October 27, the St. Ignace woman turned 40 years old, defying all odds.

Her mother, Yvonne Weaver, said she is a miracle. During her life, Miss Champion has had 22 surgeries, been in a coma three times, and was resuscitated after several severe seizures. Ms. Weaver said time after time, her doctors are dumbfounded by Tina's story of survival.

"Back when Tina was born, the hospital told me, 'Your daughter was born with this birth defect and she's not going to make it through the night,'" she said. "She didn't ask for this. I decided I'm going to

give her a chance at life, so I learned everything about this disease as I could, and I'm going to take care of her as long as possible."

Spina bifida is a spinal column defect in which some vertebrae do not form properly around part of a baby's spinal cord. In more serious cases, like Miss Champion's, the defect can make walking and daily activities nearly impossible. She has no feeling below her waist and, as a result of the defect, uses a motorized wheelchair for mobility.

Children born with spina bifida commonly develop another defect called hydrocephalus, which prevents the free circulation and absorption of spinal fluid through the spinal cord and brain, causing swelling around the brain. That build-up of fluid causes extreme pain and pressure on the brain unless properly drained. Miss Champion has had three surgeries, the last when she was 13 years old, to have tubes put in place to drain spinal fluid from her head into her

stomach.

She has limited mobility in her arms, is blind in one eye, and poor vision in the other eye. As a result of these birth defects, her ability to learn and mental capacity is limited, too.

"On a social-level she's a teenager, but on an academic-level she's at an elementary age," Ms. Weaver said.

But all that doesn't stop her from having fun. Every Tuesday, Miss Champion and her mother, who live together in St. Ignace, go bowling at Gateway Lanes. She has a special ramp that attaches to her wheelchair so she can push her bowling ball down the lane. She has her own bowling ball with her name engraved on it.

Miss Champion also has some responsibilities at home. She is responsible for brushing her teeth and administering her own medication. Each day she takes six pills. Her mother has taught her to let her know when she is running out of pills so she can order more.

Miss Champion also enjoys many activities that keep her busy.

"She loves crafts, she crochets, likes to put puzzles together, and do word searches. I try to give her things that will stimulate her mind," Ms. Weaver said. "She leads a good productive life in that wheelchair."

Ms. Weaver has a lot of help from family and friends in caring for her daughter. Longtime friend Brenda Spencley has helped her care for Miss Champion for 30 years. She comes over at least



Tina Champion sits in her motorized wheelchair, posing with her mother, Yvonne Weaver (back left), and friend and caretaker Brenda Spencley. Miss Champion was born with two birth defects and was not expected to survive long after birth. Tuesday, October 27, she reached her 40th birthday.

three times a week to help take Miss Champion around town.

Ms. Weaver said getting her daughter ready to leave their apartment is probably the most cumbersome part of a day. She said it takes two people to lift her out of her wheelchair and into a seat in their station wagon; the wheelchair is placed in the back.

"If it wasn't for my guardian angel, Brenda, I wouldn't be able to do what I do. I would probably have to put Tina in a home," Ms. Weaver said. "She's like Tina's surrogate mother."

Miss Champion and her mother came to St. Ignace in 1978, where she was enrolled in public school. She was educated in St. Ignace

schools until she was 26, under state law the oldest age students can be enrolled in public school.

Ms. Weaver said her daughter is friendly and easy to get along with, so she has made many friends over the years. More than 300 of those friends helped her celebrate her 40th birthday Saturday, October 24, at Timmy Lee's Pub on US-2.

"I never in a million years thought she'd be 40 years old. Doctors said it would never happen, and I told them, 'If she lives to be 40, I'm going to show the world,'" Ms. Weaver said. As for the party, "Everything was perfect. Nothing is too good for my daughter."

## News About People From St. Ignace

Blair: From page 25

Get well wishes to Helen Hyslop, who is recovering from recent surgery.

Traveling to St. Ignace to attend the memorial service Saturday, October 24, for their aunt, Hazel

Decker, were Michelle Friend of Nicholasville, Kentucky, Shannon Lemmon of Denver, Colorado, Mike Smith of Grand Rapids, Sandy and Shelby Kirchoff of Negaunee, and Wesley and Debbie Therrian and son, Josh, of

Whitewater, Wisconsin. Also attending the service were her son, Jim McMillan, of Davison, her husband, Joe Decker, of Woodland, Pennsylvania, Eldon McMillan of Onaway, and Joy and Tim Gulick of Portland.

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