

**YOU NEWS**

# NICELA'S ON HER WAY

The little girl who captured South Africans' hearts last year is recovering from one of many operations to remove an abnormal growth

By PIETER VAN ZYL Pictures: DAVID BRIERS



Little Nicela Naudé with her adoptive parents, Madelaine and Jacques.

**S**HE'S been crowned "Princess Nicela". It says so on the back of her mother's car, on her toy bicycle, on the stickers and calendars that are sold to raise money for her trust fund.

With curls bouncing on her little head Nicela Naudé toddles around – and occasionally trips and falls – in her parents' home in Bothasig, Cape Town. The silver letters on her pink T-shirt read, "I'm so famous – friend me." She has more than 9 000 friends on her Facebook page and on 16 March more than 300 of them attended a party to celebrate the little fighter's first birthday.

It's hard to believe underneath that pink shirt are the scars of a four-hour operation she had last month. Surgeons removed as much of the abnormal tissue growth on the left side of her chest as they could. Nikki was born with Klippel-Trénaunay syndrome. One in 100 000 people worldwide suffer from the condition, which affects the formation of blood and lymph vessels.

Eight days after the operation she had

to be rushed back to Mediclinic Louis Leipoldt in Bellville when her chest swelled up as a result of bleeding. "That's always the risk with this kind of operation," says Professor Frank R Graewe, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon at the University of Stellenbosch and leader of the team that performed the operation. Fortunately he could stop the bleeding and sew everything up again.

Nikki's incredible story is made even more heart-rending by the fact her biological mother rejected her and wasn't even interested in knowing her gender before leaving the hour-old baby at a hospital in Cape Town (YOU, 2 October 2014).

"We haven't heard a word from her," her adoptive mother, Madelaine Naudé (43), tells us. "If she contacts us one day we'll thank her for the gift she left us."

At the time not one of the roughly 80 South African families on the waiting list to adopt children was prepared for the challenge of taking care of Nikki and her misshapen little body.

Then the Naudés heard about her. "I couldn't believe someone could just

leave a baby like that," says Jacques (43), a policeman. "She's changed my entire outlook on life. She smiles all the time, even when her chest was swollen. How can the rest of us complain?"

**T**HE one unpleasant thing they've had to deal with is people questioning their motives, Madelaine says. "We've been harassed by people who report us to welfare claiming we're exploiting Nikki to get money and demanding that we be investigated," the police-station clerk explains. "It's very traumatic for both of us." All they want is for her to have a better future.

Nikki's prognosis is good, Professor Graewe says. "I cut through the abnormal growth to reduce it. I left the left nipple, the skin and the tissue beneath so that when she's a teen she can develop normal breasts."

The syndrome can be dangerous if the tissue spreads to the brain or cuts off the blood supply to her organs. "But in her case there's no such danger because the tissue is located elsewhere."

In the follow-up operations more of the tissue growth, which was the size of a dinner plate, will be removed from her chest along with scars on her left arm and hand. This is why the Naudés started a trust fund – to help to pay for the mostly cosmetic surgery, which isn't covered by their medical aid. "With Madelaine's posts on Facebook Nikki touches the hearts of people every day," Jacques says. "They're inspired by her situation."

■ To follow Nicela's progress and for information on how to support her go to her Facebook page, Baby Nicela Fund. ■



LEFT: How YOU reported the story last year of Nicela and the syndrome she was born with. ABOVE: At least five operations still await this cutie.

