

Towson family feels God's presence at every turn

By Matt Palmer

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The Sugarman family never takes any life for granted.

Matriarch Inchi gave birth, via C-section, to her fifth child, Maura, in California eight years ago.

"I just felt like there was an elephant sitting on my chest," she said. "I was trying to breathe, but couldn't get up. I just passed out."

"I was holding the baby," her husband Barry said, "and (Inchi) made a sound. All the buzzers started going off. I took a step and they made us leave. On the PA system, I could hear them saying, 'Any cardiologist! Any cardiologist to labor and delivery! Code blue!'"

Inchi had an amniotic fluid embolism, which meant she hemorrhaged blood and required 22 transfusions of blood, Barry said. The death rate is about 80 percent, but the vast majority of infants survive.

Inchi faded.

"She crashed," Barry said. "She was in ICU and given last rites."

Barry, briefly, faced life without his wife and raising their children by himself. He composed himself, "only by God's grace. I don't know how many rosaries I prayed."

Barry called almost every priest and Catholic leader he knew. Prayer chains began all over the country for his wife.

Inchi, in her recovery, was sedated for a day.

"Within 36 hours she went from gone to sitting up," Barry said.

Now 17, daughter Cecilia remembers hearing the story as a little girl.

"I was just so close to losing her," she says now. "I didn't even want to listen to that."

Noticing the little things

Inchi, 50, typically likes to run 3.1 miles in a wooded path near Towson. On June 5, she stumbled upon a tiny tuxedo kitten, abandoned and sick, standing by herself. The kitten's eyes were crusty.

Inchi thought: "Oh my gosh, she's so small."

She stopped her run, knelt down and called to the cat, doing mock meows. The kitten didn't run away and began to check out Inchi, meowing at her.

"Finally, I just put my hands slowly on her and picked her up," Inchi said. "I couldn't leave her there. I thought, 'Alright, I guess I've got to take her home.'"

The Sugarman family, now parishioners at St. Ignatius on Calvert Street in Baltimore, has a dog that does not shed.

When she arrived at the window of the family home, several of Inchi's children bounded about the house excited, despite the fact that many members had allergies.

"She looked a little sick," Inchi said. "She was sneezing. She had an eye infection."

The thought occurred to give the kitten away, particularly to a family who didn't have allergies. They feared giving the kitten away to a local shelter because her sickness might result in being put to sleep.

They knew a young cat should be more active and sought medical advice.

"She was not very alert or frisky at all," Barry said. "Whether she was in your arms or not, she just sat there."

They took the kitten to the veterinarian, who prescribed medicine and vitamins for her upper respiratory and eye infections, but didn't sound overly positive about the kitten's future.

Fourth-child Tessa, 14, remembers the doctor repeatedly saying, 'If she survives.'

“He was not very hopeful,” Inchi added. “He wasn’t discouraging me, but he treated her for free.”

Very quickly, it appeared like the family was getting hooked on a kitten that might break their hearts with a quick life.

“I just loved her,” Tessa said. “My dad said she might not survive and I was so upset. I would hold her and she wouldn’t look up. I was so scared.”

Initially skeptical of having a kitten in the house, Barry was worn down and became smitten with the family’s new addition – now called Snowball.

“It was a war of attrition,” he joked.

The children are helping take care

Now the family’s house has various cat toys and furniture scattered throughout the house.

“How can I not love her? It’s like we were meant to meet,” Inchi said.

Watch a video of Inchi Surgarman explaining how she discovered Snowball:

A family of faith

The family moved to Baltimore a few years ago after some seven years in Sacramento. Barry and Inchi met and married 25 years ago in New York and spent some time living in New Jersey and here in Maryland in Montgomery County.

The family moved to the Baltimore area after Barry was recruited by Laureate Education to develop curriculum. Prior to the offer, the family decided to return

“It was so providential,” Inchi said. “It’s just amazing to see the hand of God in all that.”

Inchi and Barry have homeschooled their five children – Noah, 22, Benzi, 20, Cecilia, Tessa and Maura, 8 – throughout the years. At one point, they were directors of an

organization called Traditions of Roman Catholic Homes. The family was part of a home school co-op during the past year.

"It's great," Inchi said. "I don't want it any other way. It's just wonderful to be with your family all of the time and really teaching them our values."

Cecilia said, "there's so much love between the children and the parents."

The Sugarman family attended the opening Mass for the Fortnight for Freedom. Seeing leadership from Archbishop William E. Lori and Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, the archbishop emeritus, in the religious liberty struggle brought pride.

Inchi joked, "We are bishop groupies. We just get so excited."

An unexpected journey

Twenty years ago this year, Barry converted to Catholicism after a lifetime of Judaism. Before he met Inchi, he was still an Orthodox Jew who wore a yarmulke. At one point, Barry, who has a doctorate in education, considered becoming a rabbi and traveled to Jerusalem.

A neighbor had given him information pamphlets.

"It kind of happened to me," Barry said. "It wasn't a plan. I didn't know it. I could feel it. I described it as the same feeling as being in love with (Inchi), but it was Jesus."

Barry and Inchi had initially been married in a civil ceremony, had their marriage blessed by Blessed Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1993. It was shortly after Barry had become a Catholic.

"It was another grace," Inchi said. "You just count those times when God has given us such big gifts that are springboards to other greater things."

Tessa was born after Barry's conversion, but she observes, "You can tell where it happened because the first two boys names are Jewish and then we're named after saints."

The family said it sees the hand of God acting in their life regularly.

“We always ask where something is going to lead,” Inchi said. “You do things and you don’t understand why, but one day God will reveal to you while it was part of his plan.”

The next phase

Besides the adoption of Snowball, one of the family’s latest projects is a band. Tessa and Cecilia are vocalists and songwriter who have played at Baltimore area gatherings.

“It’s a blessing that our gifts are being (recognized),” Cecilia said.

Cecilia won a pro-life songwriting contest in Sacramento when she was 14. The song was called “I am real” and was from the perspective of a growing child inside a mother. She used the money to buy a guitar to further her musical aspirations.

“I used to big on YouTube covers, but now I’m more into live performances,” said Cecilia, who’s YouTube channel has more than 60,000 views.

“We do a lot of covers and originals,” said Tessa, who provides backup vocals and plays guitar and piano.

“I’ve been playing guitar for six years now and she just got into during the last year and is better than me,” Cecilia said of Tessa.

The family is going to take a family vacation in Nashville and will play at various “open mic” nights.

Inchi, who has a bachelor’s and master’s degree in business, serves as the band’s manager. She formerly worked for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, doing grass roots marketing for the group.

The girls know they have a mother and father who have faced adversity head on, survived and thrived.

“I love them,” Cecilia said. “They’re my best friends, I can tell them anything. I can’t imagine it being any different.”

Watch Cecilia and Tessa Sugarman's cover of Maroon 5's "Payphone":