

EXPERIENCE—JIM JOHANNSEN, ARVADA, COLO. SPECIAL DELIVERY

Due to the loving support and prayers of his fellow SGI-USA members, Jim Johannsen says, ‘Our son Garrett’s birth was an incontrovertible victory.’

March 29 started out like any other day—with my Buddhist prayers and a drive through Denver rush-hour traffic to work. Just before lunch, I received a call from my wife, Janet. She went to our midwife’s office because she noticed a significant change in the baby’s movement in her 32nd week of pregnancy (“normal” term is 40 weeks). When the first words she said were, “I hope you’re ready,” I knew there was a serious problem.

Apparently the baby was in position to be born—two months too early. On the phone she said, “Gloria (our midwife) wants us to focus our minds on April 12 as the birth date, and get to the hospital as soon as possible.” Even Gloria herself had felt that labor would start at any moment, but would be thrilled if we could make it to April 12.

I told my co-workers about the situation, and after wrapping a few things up, I headed for home. I chanted Nam-myoho-renge-kyo all the way, my only thought being: “We have to win!”

My wife and I packed a few things and headed for the hospital along with our 4-year-old son, Gregory. Thus began the most intense experience in my 26 years of practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

As medical professionals often do, when we checked Janet into the hospital, our doctor and midwife painted the worst-case scenario for us. The baby would not be able to breathe on its own, and would require an extensive stay in ICU. Hopefully its brain function would not be too seriously impaired. Dazed and in shock, I could only chant under my breath for victory.

Janet was given a steroid shot to accelerate development of the baby’s lungs. This would take 24 hours to take effect.

Gregory and I went home, and after putting him to bed, I sent out e-mails to fellow members asking them to chant for us.

I had to drop everything at work in order to care for Gregory. He had been staying at home with Janet, and we did not have time to make arrangements for his care, so that was up to me.

On March 31, a test was done to detect the presence of amniotic fluid—to see if there was any leakage that would indicate a break in the bag of waters enclosing the baby. A trace of this fluid was found. The medical staff was predicting a birth within 24 hours, and advising us to be ready for the possibility of a lengthy stay in ICU for the baby. When I got back home, I e-mailed again, asking for people to chant for us.

Janet was chanting several hours a day in the hospital. I knew that my own prayers for victory were critical, but the demands on my time were such that I could chant very little. As such, I was quite stressed out because I was on-call 24 hours a day in case the baby was born; taking care of my son and running back and forth to the hospital; and the medical staff painted a very bleak situation.

I also was battling chronic insomnia that had plagued me for the past two years, and this situation certainly didn’t make it any easier to sleep—constantly waiting for the phone

call from the hospital telling me a birth was under way. Janet was calm and confident—I was a wreck. Gregory was having quite a hard time too, only being able to see his mother for a couple hours each day when we went to the hospital. He had never been away from her for more than a couple days at a time before.

I still kept chanting as much as I was able, anywhere I was, with the thought “we have to win” and e-mailing progress reports to a growing list of family, friends and fellow members around the world.

We received many encouraging responses in return. For every member who wrote, I know there were many more behind the scenes who were chanting for us. We could feel the prayers that people were chanting for us as if it were a physical force. I felt a lot more chanting was necessary than I was able to do. I believe their prayers really kept me together and re-emphasized the value of the SGI organization. Everyone was willing to help chant.

The peri-natal unit at Rose Medical Center, where my wife’s room was, is reached through a hallway off the rest of the maternity floor. This is a unit for high-risk pregnancies. In that hallway hang pictures of babies who were successful survivors of premature birth and other high-risk factors—some as early as 23 weeks. They call it the Hall of Hope, and I walked down it every day chanting inside for all of the people in desperate situations there. This unit was full to overflowing the entire time Janet was there.

The hospital staff was great. We were indeed fortunate to have so many talented and caring people looking after us.

Janet was in a high-risk situation because the bag of waters was broken. With each day, the risk of infection and contamination of the amniotic fluid increased. At the same time, each day that the baby gained inside the womb was priceless to its development.

Janet had been given antibiotics to minimize the risk of infection.

On April 3, an amniocentesis was conducted to determine whether any infection was present. The following day, the results of the test showed no infection, and further showed that the baby’s lungs were developed so that it could breathe on its own. An ultrasound conducted at the same time approximated the baby’s weight at 5 pounds! The doctors and the insurance company were pushing for immediate inducement of labor, but we continued to chant for the baby to be born at exactly the right time.

More days passed, and the pressure put on us to induce grew. We knew that the insurance company at some point would draw the line and say things had to proceed. Our midwife, who was well aware of our Buddhist practice, supported us and kept saying that ultimately it was our decision.

We couldn’t delay indefinitely. In addition to concern for the baby’s health, I was on leave from work—my co-workers were very supportive and told me they would take care of everything at work. Even so, I am in a commission-only position, and if I don’t work, I don’t get paid. Most of the deals I put together in the commercial mortgage business take quite a while to come to fruition, so I was set back quite a bit.

We continued to chant, usually doing evening prayers together in Janet’s room (we later found out that the nurses loved the sound of our chanting and would turn on the room monitor when we were doing it and listen at the nurses’ station).

We knew that the risk of infection was increasing greatly with each day that passed, so we gave the go-ahead to the midwife to schedule a time for natural labor inducement. When we looked at the calendar, we realized the date was April 12! We had little expectation at the start that we would make it this far—only a desperate hope and prayer.

I used the following passages from Nichiren Daishonin’s writings to keep my spirits high: “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is like the roar of a lion. What sickness can therefore be an obstacle? ... Muster your faith, and pray to this Gohonzon. Then what is there that cannot be achieved?” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 412).

Labor was induced and the baby was born—a son—Garrett James Johannsen, 6 pounds, 12 ounces! The ICU people were hovering and checked the baby out within seconds after he was born, and gave him a clean bill of health! His APGAR score (a method of judging a baby’s health based on skin tone, breathing, and responsiveness) was 8–9, as good as it gets in our mile-high altitude!

Our son Garrett’s safe and healthy delivery was an incontrovertible victory for our family. He came home with us two days later, and now at 4 months old shows no adverse effects from his early start. He’s also the happiest baby I’ve ever seen!

I’d like to thank everyone who prayed for us and encouraged and helped us throughout this ordeal—this is *your* victory as well. To anyone who might be in a similar situation, never give up hope. You will be victorious as long as you keep chanting and trusting the power of your practice.

As a final note, our midwife was so impressed with the whole situation that she has decided to start chanting! A card she sent us after the birth said: “In all my 17 years of practice as a midwife never before have I come away from a birth and felt that a little part of me was being born—until now. You are directing me to use the ‘Buddha spirit’ within me.”