

Driscoll Children's Hospital Miracle Child

Remarkable Resilience from a Young Survivor



Jorge Maldonado describes his son Julian as a good kid with "tons of energy". He loves the outdoors and anything physical, and has played basketball, soccer and football throughout his childhood. Growing up in El Paso, he was a school athlete before the family's relocation to Corpus Christi just over one year ago.

On an ordinary January day, shortly after their move to Corpus Christi, Julian and his family were in San Antonio visiting relatives for a fun-filled holiday weekend. That Sunday, Julian came down with fever and vomiting, but his parents weren't overly concerned. "We thought it was a stomach virus. Just the stomach flu," Julian's mother Jennifer said. "Nothing crazy."

On Monday, he seemed to be getting worse. They took him to an Urgent Care center in San Antonio, where they thought it was appendicitis and referred them to the local children's hospital. However, the hospital's physicians ruled out appendicitis and chalked it up to a typical stomach bug, so they discharged him, and the family returned home to Corpus Christi.

An Unexpected Turn

That night at home, Julian took a turn for the worse, running a high fever and having trouble sleeping. He began to complain that his leg was hurting, and that he had pain in his right torso and back. That's when his parents, knowing something was very wrong, made the decision to bring him to the emergency room at Driscoll Children's Hospital.

Julian and his parents headed to the ER at midnight, and by this point, he was critically ill—in such pain that he couldn't stand up. They met with orthopedic surgeon Dr. Kathryn Weissman, and upon consulting with other doctors, she rushed Julian back for an emergency MRI, where they discovered an overwhelming infection. "Dr. Weissman is our savior," remarks Jennifer. "She saved his life."

Dr. Weissman immediately called for an emergency surgery to examine the inside of his leg. The operation included incisions on the outside and inside of his leg, from the ankle to mid-thigh, as well as his back where the pain was increasing.

Julian's parents waited while he spent nearly five hours in surgery. Still unsure of the type or severity of the infection, they were hopeful it could be resolved after this operation. It wasn't until he was in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit that they realized the possibility that he may not even survive.

Miracle Child: Julian Maldonado (11)
Mom: Jennifer Maldonado
Dad: Jorge Maldonado
Siblings: Stepbrother Damian 15,
Abram 9, Aliyah 7
Physical Therapist: Mandy Alaniz

The Diagnosis

The team of doctors left no stone unturned while seeking to diagnose the infection. Julian hadn't had any cuts or scrapes, and hadn't been in the water, which could've resulted in a bacterial infection.

After the initial exploratory surgery, they took him in for a second surgery. Jorge and Jennifer waited until the doctors

reappeared with serious solemnity, requesting their signature for permission for an amputation during this operation. "A parent just isn't prepared to hear that," Jorge says quietly.

The following week was filled with a series of surgeries, and what the doctors concluded was grim; Julian was diagnosed with a very rare form of necrotizing fasciitis, a serious bacterial skin infection that spreads quickly and kills the body's soft tissue. They suspected the infection to have been caused by clostridium—a bacteria found in many environmental sources, as well as the intestines of humans and animals. Extremely difficult to pinpoint, necrotizing fasciitis can be deadly in a very short amount of time. Julian had less than a 50% chance of surviving—even 30% before one of the surgeries.

"Any time a surgeon hears that term, immediately we're thinking of someone who is on the verge of death," said Dr. Mohammad Emran, Pediatric Surgeon at Driscoll Children's Hospital. "I've seen this before in adults, but this is probably only the second case I've seen in a child."

It wasn't until several surgeries later that they realized Julian had a fighting chance—and although not out of the woods—the Maldonados could breathe a sigh of relief.

Julian's family attributes his successful fight and survival to his outstanding



resilience and maturity, a quality you can see when talking to him about his experience. He laughs and recalls the surgeries now with his siblings—with optimism and humor that makes it all seem like just a bad day at school. No big deal.

"The doctors and staff were all amazing," says Jennifer. "They made us feel comfortable every step of the way." After the amputation of his leg and a series of surgeries, Julian began his recovery. It was difficult for his siblings to see the changes in his leg for the first time, but Julian's positive attitude helped ease their sadness. The fighter that he is, Julian began physical therapy only two weeks later.

Julian's Physical Therapy

Mandy Alaniz is Julian's physical therapist at Driscoll Children's Hospital. As we talk to Julian and Mandy, Julian's mom is sitting in a chair nearby for support. Julian and Mandy joke together and give each other a hard time as though they're old friends. Mandy pushes Julian to his limits, but it's clear that Julian is up for the challenge.

As we interview them, Julian is walking around with his prosthetic, taking breaks periodically to rest and remove it. Then he puts it back on and gets right back to work.

Mandy explains that Julian gets bored easily, has boundless energy and she must constantly make it interesting to keep his attention. "He's incredibly advanced at this stage compared to most," she smiles. "He loves obstacle courses and specific challenges, sometimes even timing them to see how he's improved."

Looking Ahead

Julian has undergone a total of 21 surgeries since January—his most recent was in May. There could be a few more in his future if the bone in his leg is still growing.

The family has received an outpouring of support, especially from Jorge's co-workers in the Border Patrol. They've received cards and well wishes from all around the country, including birthday cards when Julian had his 11th birthday in the hospital. Wounded Warriors have served as mentors, and Julian is already becoming a mentor himself. He's scheduled to meet another patient who is going through a similar experience.

Amazingly, Julian was just in 5th grade when this all began. Through his recovery,

he attended a special classroom at the hospital from January to March, followed by the homebound program. He finished the school year with straight A's. He'll be going back to Flour Bluff Intermediate for 6th grade in August.

Julian still goes fishing with his parents—one of his favorite activities—with a special waterproof prosthetic. But before he can get back to baseball and other athletics, he'll have to work on a treadmill, then work his way up to running. It's a slow and tedious process, but Julian is taking it on at lightning speed.

The experience has brought the family closer, offering perspective, as tragedies often tend to do. "We don't sweat the small stuff anymore," says Jennifer. "We focus on the simpler things." She says they push him at home. Other than remodeling the bathroom to include safety features like handrails, everything else she says "feels so normal." He still does his chores, plays with his brothers and sister and laughs a lot. Julian chimes in and says "I mowed the lawn yesterday."

To his entire family's surprise, when asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Julian responded "an actor". His family chuckled, but he assured them in all sincerity that this is what he wants to do. He has more confidence than ever before—and nothing will stand in his way.

