

A mother's heart: Johnstown native welcomes baby, has aneurysm and valve surgery weeks later

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Katie (Ahlers) Standley, right, shown with husband Jake and holding her son Lawrence Paul, had heart surgery just weeks after giving birth in 2020.

This year brings a Mother's Day to cherish for Katie (Ahlers) Standley.

The 31-year-old Johnstown native is celebrating her second holiday with her son, Lawrence – and getting to this point has been a journey.

“This Mother's Day feels a lot different, because I'm actually able to care for my son,” the Falls Church, Virginia, resident said. “I'm able to pick him up and change him – and that in itself is extremely rewarding. I'm excited to spend Mother's Day with my family and celebrate.”

Following testing in 2017, Standley learned she had bicuspid aortic valve, a congenital defect where the valve has two leaflets instead of three, and an aortic aneurysm, a balloon-like bulge in the aorta that can dissect or rupture.

“At this point, the biggest concern was the aneurysm, and they didn’t know at what point it was growing,” Standley said. “It was monitored from 2017 to 2019 without any changes, and I was cleared to get pregnant. I’ve always wanted children and it was my dream to become a mother one day.”

She said that throughout her pregnancy, she had echocardiograms every two months to check for any changes.

“It was my January 2020 echo, and I got a call and my cardiologist told me he had to talk to me and that the aneurysm had grown to an unsafe size and it was really alarming to them,” Standley said.

“That was the starting point of, ‘Oh no, something is wrong,’ and it became a roller coaster of things happening.”

Surgery in Cleveland

She said her doctors in Virginia debated how to approach care because her scenario was a first for them.

Her case was even submitted to the Mayo Clinic for review.

Through a recommendation, Standley, who was 34 weeks pregnant at the time, called the Cleveland Clinic for a second opinion and was told to get in the car and head to the hospital.

“I came to Johnstown and my parents took me and my husband (Jake) to Cleveland, and I was admitted on my first appointment at the end of February,” she said. “Doctors were trying to figure out what to do based on the information from the two other hospitals and their top surgeons were meeting to figure out how to make sure the baby would be born healthy and that I was alive.”

On March 2, 2020, at 36 weeks, Standley gave birth to her son Lawrence Paul via C-section.

In the delivery room was a cardiology team monitoring her heart, ready to operate should complications arise.

“Everything went really well and my husband was there,” Standley said. “I was told I’d be put under if there was an issue, and I kept repeatedly asking the anesthesiologist if everything was OK and if I was going to be OK.”

‘Wrote me a letter’

After spending a few days in ICU, Standley was discharged to spend a week at an extended-stay hotel in Cleveland with her son and family before returning to the hospital for heart surgery.

On March 20, 2020, she underwent open heart surgery.

The surgeon successfully removed the aneurysm, grafted the spot and repaired the aortic valve.

But because of the pandemic, Standley's husband and parents couldn't be with her in the hospital following the surgery.

In fact, her husband was with her when she went into surgery, but was told he'd have to leave the hospital before it was over due to a change in hospital policy.

"That was rough and he took a piece of paper in the waiting room and wrote me a letter for them to give me," Standley said.

"I knew it upset my parents a lot, too, and it broke my mom's heart not be there with me."

Standley said the recovery from the heart surgery was challenging.

"I had the bottom half of my body recovering from the C-section and the top half recovering from heart surgery," she said. "I wasn't even able to lift my arms up well at all, so in the hospital being there by myself I tried FaceTiming my family, and I was terrible at holding my phone. I did end up taking some videos because that was my only way of talking with my family to keep in touch."

'Live a normal life'

After about a week in the hospital, Standley was discharged but stayed in Cleveland for a while for check-ups.

"I then went to Johnstown for 12 weeks to stay with my parents because I could not care for my son, and I wasn't allowed to pick him up or do anything with my arms for eight weeks," she said.

Standley didn't go home to Falls Church until June.

"I am feeling so much better now, and it's weird to reflect back on what happened a year ago looking at pictures and videos and realizing what had happened to our family," she said.

"I'm really grateful to be on this side of it. My tests have all been coming back fairly well, and I'm hopefully getting tests this month to approve me to continue to live a normal life."

Standley, who had to leave her teaching job prior to the birth of her son, has taken up photography as a hobby and an as additional way to bring income into the family.

"I have loved every minute of this past year with my son, so I would love to continue just being with him," she said.