



## Dear Fellow Parents and Friends,

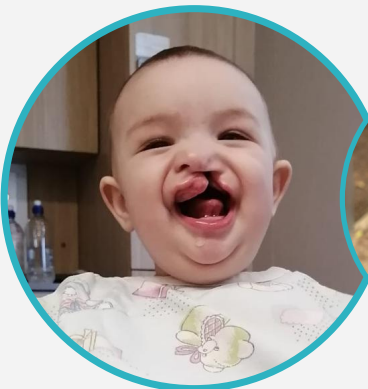
We are the proud parents of a beautiful, brave girl named Lily. Our journey with Lily has been a profound lesson in love, faith, and resilience, and we hope by sharing our story, we can offer comfort and inspiration to others facing similar challenges.

Our adventure began with the purest form of joy – the anticipation of our first child. Everything seemed perfect until our 16-week scan, which revealed an unexpected turn in our path: Lily was going to be born with a unilateral cleft lip and palate. That silent drive home from the hospital in Pretoria, heavy with unspoken fears and worries, is a moment we'll never forget.

In those early days, we leaned heavily on each other and our faith in God. We named her Lily, a symbol of purity and renewal, as a reminder of the beauty and strength in her journey. We shared our story early with friends and family, building a support system that would prove invaluable in the times to come.

The wait to see the fetal expert felt endless, like wandering in a desert of uncertainty. But in each appointment, we found small oases of hope – Lily's ten fingers, her active limbs, her perfectly developing brain and thumbs up during one of the scans. Yet, the confirmation of her cleft lip and palate brought a mix of emotions; fear for the challenges she would face, yet a deep love for our little girl, perfect in our eyes.

Lily's birth on March 8, 2022, was a day filled with divine grace. She was more beautiful than we could have imagined, and despite the initial fear, seeing her for the first time was a moment of pure love. The following weeks in NICU were a whirlwind of emotions, but we were supported by the incredible care and support from the medical team, especially Dr. Sharan Naidoo.



Coming home from the NICU marked a new chapter. It was daunting, knowing that we were now her primary caregivers, responsible for managing her special feeding needs and navigating her medical care. But together, we learned, adapted, and grew stronger as a family.



Lily's first surgery at six months was a major milestone.

Although her recovery was painful and challenging, it was incredible to see her learn to feed with her newly repaired soft palate. Her second surgery for lip and hard palate repair brought further challenges, but also tremendous progress.

Today, Lily is almost two years old and thriving. She's kind, empathetic, and loves playing outside. She has come so far in her speech therapy, and we're amazed every day by her resilience and spirit. Yes, she's apprehensive around doctors, but who can blame her after all she's been through?

Our journey with Lily has taught us more than we could have imagined – about love, faith, strength, and the importance of community. We've turned our experiences into action, creating the Soothing Lily garment to help other children like her and collaborating with the Blissful Cleft Foundation to support families on similar journeys.

To those of you reading this, know that you're not alone. Your journey may be challenging, but within it lies the opportunity for immense growth and love. Lily has taught us that miracles do happen, and we hope her story brings you the same hope and inspiration she brings to us every day.

With all our love and support,  
Arno & Reinette Blake

