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Baby Photographed Reaching From Womb



AP Photo

By DAVID PITT, Associated Press Writer

DOUGLASVILLE, Ga. (AP) - Samuel Armas' parents love to show off photos of their baby boy, particularly one taken nearly four months before he was born.

The photo, shot during in-utero surgery to correct a birth defect, shows Samuel's penny-sized fist reaching outside Julie Armas' womb, grasping at a doctor's finger.

That tiny fist has added fuel to an international abortion debate, appearing on anti-abortion billboards in Ireland and in newspapers in France, Germany, Norway, Singapore and the United States.

Abortion opponents say the image shows fetuses - even at only 21 weeks - are viable and aware.

Abortion-rights supporters say the parents' decision to have fetal surgery to correct spina bifida is a good example of how every woman should have the right to determine the course of her pregnancy.

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``It mushroomed beyond what we thought it would," said Mrs. Armas, 28. ``We wanted people to know that when we found out about our baby, it was not the end of the world. There are options to abortion and even to traditional treatment."

She and her husband, Alex, 29, allowed USA Today in the operating room for an article on the surgical team at Nashville's Vanderbilt University.

Samuel was the youngest fetus to have the surgery. Doctors opened his mother's womb Aug. 19, 1999, and closed the opening in his spine caused by the spina bifida, a congenital disease that often leads to paralysis and other problems.

As Dr. Joseph Bruner prepared to close the womb, Samuel rolled over and thrust his fist through the surgical opening. Bruner gently tucked the tiny hand back inside and finished the procedure.

Free-lance photographer Michael Clancy's captured the moment.

``It shows a baby before when we would consider it to be viable. Clearly you have a tiny hand," said Laura Echevarria, spokeswoman for the National Right to Life Committee. ``With the notoriety the picture has garnered, we're seeing people becoming more educated about fetal development. With that knowledge comes a renewed respect for life."

Abortion-rights supporters, however, say the photo doesn't hurt their cause.

``This is one of the prime examples of where it must be between the doctor and the family," said Patricia Ireland, President of the National Organization for Women. ``Just as the decision to have in-utero surgery was made in this case, it cannot be a political decision. It has to be a decision made by

the woman that's carrying the fetus."

The Armases had suffered through two miscarriages before learning Mrs. Armas was pregnant with Samuel. Even after an ultrasound revealed spina bifida and doctors told them the baby may never walk and could have serious brain damage, the hope of having a child overwhelmed their fears.

"When we had the first indication something was wrong, I didn't care," Mrs. Armas said. "I was 14 weeks pregnant. We still had a heartbeat. I had a baby that was alive."

Mrs. Armas, a registered nurse, began researching spina bifida and read about a group of doctors in Nashville who were pioneering fetal surgery.

Samuel, now 14 1/2 pounds, is developing normally at the family's home in Douglasville, a suburb 35 miles west of Atlanta. It's still unclear whether he'll be able to walk; he sees a physical therapist weekly and doctors monitor his progress.

"For us, there's a lot we want for him," Mrs. Armas said. "He will be computer literate, he'll speak Spanish. There are multitudes of possibilities he could do. He'll swim and play golf."

Tears well up in her eyes as she considers the challenges overcome and those yet to be faced.

But the problems caused by spina bifida are a small part of the boy's life, added Aramas, an engineer for Delta Airlines.

"The details of his limitations become insignificant," he said, "and that's the understatement of the year