

FAS fails to dampen Tisha's spirits

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Sipokazi Fokazi

Cape Town - For the first 10 weeks of her life Tisha Lourens lay in an incubator at Mowbray Maternity Hospital with no mother to love, cuddle or feed her much-needed breast milk.

Apart from being born prematurely, the effects of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) were so dreadful that her tiny body shivered from the withdrawal symptoms of alcohol.



Tisha Lourens, with her foster mother Vivien, was born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and was expected to die as a baby, but 20 years on, she now holds down a job and has thrived. Picture: Cindy Waxa. Credit: INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Her biological mother, from Brown's Farm in Philippi, had abandoned her in hospital, and wanted nothing to do with her.

When the then emergency foster mother for the Cape Town Child Welfare, Vivien Lourens of Pinelands, received the petite baby, who weighed just over 2kg, the first thing that came to her mind was to give her a bottle to feed.

“I realised then that she could not suckle. Her reflexes were so poorly developed due to FAS that she could not drink from the bottle. In panic I phoned the hospital telling them that the baby was not feeding. A nurse that answered just said Don't worry about it, she won't live beyond this weekend',” Laurence recalled.

Not only did she have FAS symptoms, but she also had a congenital hole in the heart and an underdeveloped stomach valve, which pushed food up when she ate.

But after intensive multi-disciplinary therapy, including physiotherapy and occupational therapy, and many visits to specialist doctors and psychologists at Red Cross Children's Hospital, the now 20-year-old Tisha thrived and healed without needing surgery - shocking doctors and proving sceptics wrong.

Despite the absence of services and support for FAS babies, she survived against all odds.

Lourens, who also cares for another adult foster daughter, Carrie Lourens, who suffers from FAS spectrum disorder (FASD), said that despite the high prevalence of FAS in the country, many mothers lived in ignorance and knew very little or nothing about the effects of alcohol on the brain of an unborn child.

The latest research finds the country has the highest recorded rate of FAS in the world with scientists estimating that 10 percent of the population is affected by either FAS or the spectrum of disorders related to it.

Though Lourens was meant to look after Tisha and Carrie temporarily, she says that after falling in love with "these special babies", her family could not let them go. "Everyone in my family just fell in love with Tisha and Carrie. They are the most wonderful human beings. They changed our lives in an amazing way, and we just could not let them go.

"I cared for Carrie from the age of eight months, and Tisha from just two months, so you can imagine the bond that I formed with them," she said.

After years of pre-primary schooling and studying at Bel Porto special needs school, Tisha and Carrie now work at the Merrypak factory in Pinelands where they package and barcode goods.

Last Friday Tisha and Carrie celebrated the 17th World Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Day - an awareness initiative that Lourens and a group of FAS activists around the world initiated in 1999.

The experience of living with a FAS-affected child has seen Lourens starting the FAS Information Centre (Fasic) where she provides information and support to people who care for FAS children.

She also wrote a book called Living With Foetal Alcohol Syndrome: Our journey with Tisha, which tells her story of dealing with the syndrome and gives tips on how to deal with FAS. Children affected by either FAS or FASD suffer from physical and behavioural problems such as learning and memory; struggling to control their emotions; communication and socialising, among other things.

Lourens said despite predictions that Tisha would fall behind her milestones and only start walking at the age of four, “she managed to beat all odds and has met most physical milestones and was walking shortly after her first birthday” thanks to rigorous early interventions.

“She still can’t read or write as her mental state has been affected by FAS quite severely, but we managed to catch up with the physical ability. She mostly works with logos and can easily identify brands she is familiar with.

“Tisha is great with computers and has learnt most things on the internet. She is great with practical stuff, she can even make looms (elastic bracelets) - thanks to the internet,” she said.

During the Cape Argus visit to her work on Wednesday, all Tisha could say was: “I love my mom, she is the only mother I know. She is very nice, and treats me well.”

sipokazi.fokazi@inl.co.za