



THE PEACEMAKER

By William R. Blythe, MD

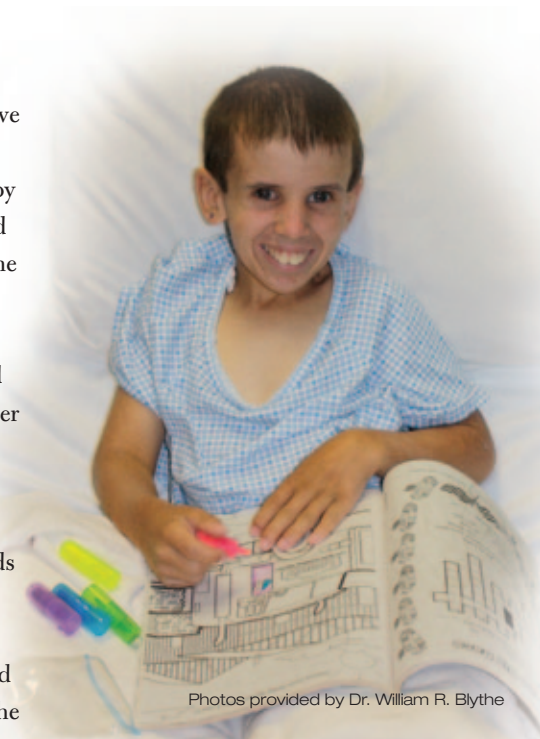
I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I MET COLT STILLWELL. IT WAS 1998, AND HE WAS ONLY SEVEN YEARS OLD AT THE TIME. I HAD BEEN IN MY PRACTICE FOR JUST ONE YEAR, AND I WAS STILL WET-BEHIND-THE-EARS AND INEXPERIENCED IN THE ART AND SKILL OF MY PROFESSION. COLT IS THE KIND OF WONDERFUL PERSON THAT ONE REMEMBERS FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE — FOR MANY REASONS.

Colt has Cockayne's Syndrome, and he is the first and only patient I have ever known with that diagnosis. This is a recessive genetic condition that is caused by a failure of his cells to repair their damaged DNA. This leads to profound injuries to the cells of the body and nervous system, with progressive degeneration of multiple tissues with age. In many ways Colt is a child trapped in a grown man's body, and in other ways he is an adult trapped in a child's. Cockayne's patients develop progressive organ failure, with eventual hearing and visual impairment. This almost always leads to blindness and deafness if they live long enough for these to develop. For the past several years we have observed a severe and progressive decline in Colt's hearing, and he has been wearing powerful hearing aids with reasonable success.

He and his mother came to me this spring and said that Colt's hearing had worsened over the past year and that he was totally deaf. Colt asked her repeatedly if he was going to "get new hearing aids now?" He desperately wanted to hear, and it was very sad to see his disappointment when I told him that there was nothing I could do for him that day. His mother asked me about performing a cochlear implant on him, and that became my new project.

The truth was, however, that I did not know if a cochlear implant would help restore Colt's hearing. Cockayne's Syndrome is a very rare condition, and it affects every organ system in the body. It very definitely affects the sensory organ of the ear — the Organ of Corti — but it also affects the nerves to and from the ear and the brain itself. Most patients develop progressive dementia and cognitive impairment as they age, so restoration of his hearing would be a challenge at best. There is only one published article describing cochlear implantation in two Cockayne's Syndrome patients, and the results were good in one and poor in the other. That was all of the data I could find to help me: one article; two patients.

But Colt had no other options and nothing to lose. If I implanted his ear and it was unsuccessful, he would be no worse off than



Photos provided by Dr. William R. Blythe

he was before surgery. It is an expensive experiment, but I am an eternal optimist. I made some calls around the country to other implant centers and to the implant manufacturers, but the experience was sparse, and the outcomes were variable.

COLT AND HIS FAMILY HAVE REMINDED ME HOW PRECIOUS OUR LIVES AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS ARE.

I spoke honestly with Colt's mother. She is a wonderful, admirable, strong woman who loves her son with everything in her. I told her that I was not certain if an implant would help his hearing, but there was some indication that it had been successful in a few other patients. I also explained that his medical insurance might not approve the procedure for him since the data was not conclusive. She agreed that Colt had nothing to lose, and she asked, "What do you think we should do?" I simply said, "I think we should go for it," and we were thus agreed.

We then embarked on the often-challenging task of applying for insurance approval for the implant. To my surprise — and to its credit — Alabama Bluecross/Blueshield approved the procedure almost immediately and with no hesitation. We called Colt's mother and told her the good news when we got his approval, and we set a date for his surgery in early July.

The day of surgery was wonderful for Colt. I had a busy schedule, and his implant was slated for mid-morning. I spoke with him and his parents in the pre-op area, while Colt colored in a NASCAR coloring book. We took pictures together, and he seemed to be more excited than nervous. I left and went to the locker room, where I stopped for a couple minutes to collect my thoughts. I closed my eyes for a second and simply said, "We really need this one. Please don't let me screw up."

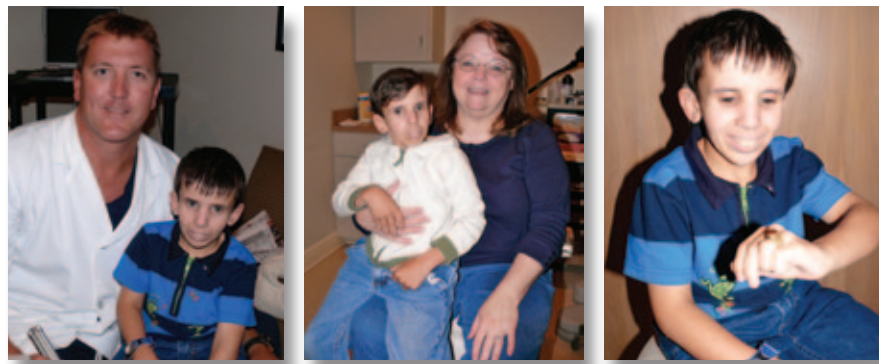
His surgery went perfectly. Colt did his part, and he came through the procedure and anesthesia like a champ. Dr. Earl Fuller and Kathy Hartzog, the nurse anesthetist, put him to sleep, and Kathy watched him throughout the surgery like he was her own child. Linda Cayple, the circulating nurse, was in charge of the OR and procedure, and she was ready for any contingency. Elaine Bailey and I operated together. Elaine is our surgical scrub tech, and she anticipates what I need before I do most of the time. We worked together quickly and silently until the task was complete, so Colt was awake and in the recovery room in short order. The case was perfect, and it is to the credit of these wonderful people with whom I have the pleasure of working every day.

And I will take a moment to give credit to everyone at East Alabama Medical Center (EAMC) as well. I have worked here for the past 12 years, and they have been wonderfully tolerant of my peculiarities and supportive of my practice. As a member of the Medical Executive Committee, I have worked first-hand with the administration for several years. The people of East Alabama need to understand what a jewel and asset we have in EAMC. Their first concern, above all others, is always providing the best care for the patients of our

community. It is a wonderful hospital, and we are very fortunate to have it.

Colt went home the day after surgery, and I saw him back in my office a week later. His wound healed properly, and we scheduled him for mapping and programming of the implant a week later. We were all nervous to see if he could hear properly with the implant. To everyone's relief and joy, the implant worked flawlessly. His hearing went from 110 decibels (totally deaf) to 25 decibels (normal) with the first programming of the device. Colt and his parents were so very happy, and we all breathed a deep sigh of relief.

I have seen him back a couple of times in clinic since the implant. He can hear well, and is able to understand most of what is said to him. On his last visit he had his Beulah High School class ring on, and he wanted to show it to everyone. He and I took pictures again, and I told him a joke as he was leaving the clinic. He laughed and giggled as he walked down the hall, which caught me off guard a little and choked me up. I went to my office to collect myself



Dr. Blythe with Colt during a follow-up visit; Colt pictured with his mom, Karen Stillwell; Colt showing off his Beulah High School Class ring.

again, and I just said, "Thanks" this time.

I have been blessed to have treated and loved so many wonderful patients, but none have touched my heart more than Colt Stillwell. I do not understand why God has granted me the opportunity to share in the life of such a wonderful, beautiful, innocent soul as Colt, but it is one of the greatest blessings in my life.

Some days the rewards of practicing medicine are few and far between. Some days — like most people, I guess — I ask myself, "Is this all there is?" Some days I feel very inadequate and insignificant, and

I wonder if I am really doing the best I can and making a difference in my little corner of the world. I spend most days generating mountains of paperwork that tend to hinder the delivery of healthcare more than facilitate it. I spend every minute of every day under the constant fear of making an honest mistake — despite my best efforts and intentions — and getting sued for it. And some days I am just simply tired of worrying all the time.

But Colt has put wind back in my sails again. Because, you see, Colt and his family have reminded me how precious our lives and our relationships are. When I am with Colt's family, I do not sense that they are sad or fearful or resentful over his condition. I do not sense that they live under the constant stress of a progressive illness. I do not sense that their lives are burdened because Colt has Cockayne's Syndrome. Rather, I sense that they are happy and that they love each other with every fiber of their beings. I sense desperation — not the type of desperation that comes from having a progressive illness — but rather the kind that comes from the desperate love between a child and a mother. And I sense joy in very simple things, which is something that I have long forgotten.

The first time I met Colt, I read his name and said to him, "Oh, so you are the famous Peacemaker!" Now that I think about it, I did not realize how true and prophetic that would be in my own life. The truth is that maybe I needed Colt as much as he needed me this summer. I think we made a little mark on each other — mine on his ear and his on my heart. And for that, I am the one who is truly blessed.

FIELD NOTES

Sport Fish and Christmas Trees: A Wintertime Delight

BY CANDIS HACKER BIRCHFIELD

Once they stood spectacularly in homes across East Alabama. Family heirlooms, children's homemade ornaments and long strands of twinkling lights adorned their upright branches. Now they lay waiting to be rediscovered beneath the clean, clear water of Lake Martin.

The classic holiday symbol described above is the Christmas tree, and since 1993, Alabama Power has worked with local groups and organizations to strategically place thousands of these trees in the 39,180-acre waters of Lake Martin. Doug Powell, an environmental specialist with Alabama Power, has been instrumental in leading this effort.

"The Christmas trees are there to attract fish," explains Powell. "We bundle them together in groups of four or five trees and sink them. There is a lot of bank area in Lake Martin with no cover on it, so the trees provide cover for fish. These bundles of trees are fish attractors, and they make it more likely that the fishermen will have an encounter with a fish."

Because the water level in Lake Martin dramatically fluctuates with the seasons, Powell and his team have been careful to place the tree bundles in both shallow- and deep-water locations.

"Not all the tree structures are created equal," warns Powell. "Generally speaking, if the structure is not near an area where the fish are going to flow through to get to the deep water, there will not be as many fish. A structure near a deep-water access will generally hold more fish."

Powell also cautioned that although the exact GPS location of each Christmas tree bundle has been documented and published at <http://www.alabamapower.com/fishdata>, oftentimes the bundles shift slightly or are even moved by anglers so that other fishermen will not be able to find them.

"You can use a depth finder to see what kind of structure is there," says Powell, "and some of these areas can prove to be productive, especially in the winter."

Thanks in part to these Christmas tree structures, Damon Abernethy, avid fisherman and fisheries development coordinator with the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries



Doug Powell collecting and distributing Christmas Trees to Lake Martin (photos provided by Doug Powell)



Damon Abernethy showing off his winter catch (photo provided by Damon Abernethy)

division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, believes winter fishing at Lake Martin is the best time for the sport.

"I love it," says Abernethy. "In fact, I have been praying about it all summer to hurry up and get here. Everywhere else can be slow as far as fish numbers are concerned, and you can go over to Lake Martin and catch fish in wintertime. It's always been a real popular lake with anglers. It's good because there are a lot of spotted bass in it, and they are more active in the winter. There is a lot of deep water and steep shoreline in Lake Martin, and those are the kinds of places you will usually find bass in the wintertime. So it's not too hard to find the fish. Another nice thing about winter fishing is there is no real advantage to getting out there right when the sun comes up. Fishing usually gets better later in the day as the water warms up."

Abernethy contends that the real challenge to fishing in Lake Martin spurs from the lake's clear water. "Lake Martin is located in an infertile, acidic water shed, which has resulted in limited vegetative growth and clear lake water. Because the water is so clear, the fish are feeding by sight. This requires a finesse presentation."

Due to a recent increase in the use of artificial Christmas trees, the number of trees used for fish-habitat structures has markedly decreased. Although Alabama Power does not sanction individuals to drop their own trees in Lake Martin, any organization or group can sponsor their own Christmas tree recycling project for fish-habitat structures through Alabama Power's Fish Habitat program. Contact Doug Powell at 205.664.6189 or by e-mail at dhpowell@southernco.com for more information.

By "finesse presentation" Abernethy is referring to a style of fishing where the angler focuses on imitating the natural environment.

"You have to use a smaller line, like a six- or eight-pound test. If you use anything bigger than that your catches will go down because the fish can see the line. Your lures also have to be more realistic, and your presentations have to be more realistic," says Abernethy.

Abernethy recommends anglers use a shaky-head worm, jigging spoon, drop-shot rig, or football-head jig in the winter. He also encourages winter anglers to fish on windy and cloudy days.

"When it's cloudy, it means it's a low-pressure weather system, and the fish are more active during those times," advises Abernethy. "Use a spinner bait, throw it right up on the bank, and reel it in just about as fast as you can, keeping the lure right under the surface of the water. You always want to cast on the windy side of the lake so when you throw the lure into the wind, the ripples in the water make the lure look more realistic. Plus, when it's windy, the bait fish are eating the plankton that are blown up against windy shorelines, and the bass are attracted to the bait fish. And if none of that stuff works, it's time to go home and watch football."

For more information on winter fishing at Lake Martin, including public-access boat ramp listings and fishing tournaments dates, visit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Web site at www.outdooralabama.com.

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