

Warminster boy to lead March of Dimes walk

By Anthony DiMattia, staff writer | Posted: Monday, April 18, 2016 5:00 am

For Justin Bowser, of Warminster, life didn't start off easy.

Just 6 days old, Justin was rushed to a hospital for a full blood transfusion after being born five weeks premature. He spent the next three weeks there, hooked up to an IV under bright lights to treat hyperbilirubinemia, or infant jaundice.

"We went for his six-day checkup (and) his pediatrician said, 'He looks a little yellow ... you need to go back to the hospital,'" said Justin's mother, Dana. "I'll just never forget sitting in the emergency room of Holy Redeemer (Hospital) waiting for the trauma team to get there (to take him to The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia).

That's when the doctor said, 'I just want you to know that he may not make it.' "

While the condition could have caused brain damage, cerebral palsy, deafness or even death, Justin survived without any lasting effects. Now 9, he's active in sports, plays the piano and gets good grades at McDonald Elementary School.

"He's basically the definition of a miracle child," his mother said.

Justin will share his story of survival as the ambassador for the 2016 March for Babies walk, which will be Sunday at Temple University Ambler campus in Upper Dublin.

Held across the U.S. each year, the walk raises money for research to find the cause of premature births and to provide comfort and information to families, organizers said. More than \$104,000 of the \$379,348 goal has already been raised, according to www.marchforbabies.org.

"It's exciting ... the walk helps babies survive," said Justin.

Justin was such an easy choice to represent this year's walk, said Deirdre Tripodi, Southeastern Pennsylvania March of Dimes community director. Each year the group chooses an ambassador from families that have suffered infant deaths, sicknesses or successes associated with premature births, Tripodi said.

"Dana was the first person I approached (this year about being an ambassador) and she was so excited," Tripodi said.

"We like to change every year and make sure the community is represented," she said. "(The Bowers)



Justin Bowser, 9, Warminster, was selected as the ambassador for the 2016 March of Dimes walk in Upper Dublin.

are just a great representation of what the March of Dimes is all about."

Since Justin's birth, Dana Bowser has participated in the walk as a member of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, a Kappa Omega Zeta Charter of Montgomery County.

For this year's walk, Dana's sorority has already surpassed its \$3,500 goal, raising more than \$5,500. More than \$2,000 of that total was raised by Dana. She set her goal at \$2,016 to commemorate the year her son was selected as ambassador.

For the Bowser family, the best part of the day will be being able to share the spotlight with a healthy son.

"I just said, 'wow, whoever thought (he'd be selected),' ... he's like the poster child," said his dad, Mark. "He's what I call a mini-celebrity now."

Many infants born before 38 weeks suffer from jaundice, a condition that causes skin and eyes to turn yellow due to an excess of bilirubin in blood that usually occurs when a baby's liver isn't fully matured, according to the Mayo Clinic. For Justin, the quick thinking of doctors to rush him in for the blood transfusion likely saved his life, Dana Bowser said.

"Justin's bilirubin levels were the highest (his doctors) had ever seen," she said. "When a child leaves the hospital it's usually around 11, his was 38½."

The hospital stay was not only hard on Justin, but also for his parents, who "lived at CHOP" for three weeks and ushered their only child to doctor checkups for the first six years of his life to make sure there were no lingering complications, Mark Bowser, said.

"The hardest part for me was wondering if he was going to make it after all the sticking (with needles) and the lights they had on him. ... He was in there with a lot of other babies and some were not as fortunate," he said. "I'm glad the memory is not there (with him) because he went through a lot for a long time."

Justin's memory of this year's walk, though, might last a lifetime.