

**“Congratulations, Mrs. Bolanos, your pregnancy test is positive!”**

# A Gift from Heaven

**FACING THE ODDS OF A DOWN SYNDROME BABY**

*By Stephanie Bolanos*

I held the phone blankly for a moment, hardly believing what I was hearing. Could it really be true that after five years of marriage I was finally, at age forty, pregnant? The nurse kindly assured me that there was no mistake and scheduled my first prenatal visit for later that week.

The next two days passed in a swirl of excitement as my husband and I called family and friends across the country with the incredible news. We immediately began considering baby names and made plans to convert our spare bedroom into a nursery. Nothing, not even my episodes of morning sickness, could diminish my elation—that is, until the day of my first prenatal appointment.



*Stephanie and Daniel*

## Cold meeting

I arrived at the obstetrics clinic with a list of enthusiastic questions. Could I continue doing aerobics? What vitamins should I take? Was it true that hair dye should be avoided during pregnancy?

The nurse called my name and led me to a small, sterile-looking office. She quickly reviewed my responses to the questionnaire I had completed in the waiting room. “So you just turned forty,” she said, noting the date of birth on my paperwork. She looked up at me, unsmiling.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Then we need to talk about your risk for Down syndrome,” she continued crisply. “You do understand that, after the age of thirty-five, your chances rise quite dramatically?”

The excited fluttering in my stomach dropped like a lead weight into my feet. I knew about Down syndrome, of course, but the thought had been the farthest from my mind since I discovered that I was pregnant.

The nurse continued rattling off information about the different tests available for detecting the condition. Completely unprepared for the abrupt turn in the conversation, I looked at her mutely, hav-

ing difficulty processing her words.

“Perhaps you’d like to think about it,” she said, handing me some papers. “Take these home and read them over.” She explained that the hospital offered a genetic counseling class and began scribbling something in my file as I looked numbly over the literature, hardly hearing what she said in her efficient, professional tone.

“Whatever test you choose,” she said, “it’s important that you decide soon—so that you can assess your options, you understand.”

I thanked the nurse mechanically and walked out of the office, my list of questions crumpled up and forgotten in my hand. As I walked to my car, her words floated in my head. *Your options.* They flowed so easily from her mouth that it wasn’t until several minutes later, as I drove home, that I realized what she had meant: she was referring to abortion.

## Tough questions

Contrary to her choice of words, my husband and I didn’t consider abortion an option if our baby had Down syndrome. Later that evening, as we reviewed the literature on various tests, different questions pressed upon us. How important was it to know if our baby had this condition or not? Could we wait until he was born? Or would it be better to know in advance so we could be ready? We quickly decided we wouldn’t consider any test that might be harmful to our child.

Diagnostic tests include amniocentesis, in which a needle is inserted into the uterus to extract fluid. Fetal cells from this sample are then subjected to chromosome tests. Similarly, with chorionic villus sampling (CVS), cells are



*Daniel plays on his parents bed.*

extracted from the placenta for examination. Both tests carry a risk for miscarriage: about 1 in 100 for amniocentesis, and 1 to 3 in 100 for CVS. As low as those figures might seem to anybody else, any risk seemed too big to us. We discarded both possibilities.

The expanded alpha fetal protein (AFP) test seemed like the only real option. A simple blood test done between 15 and 20 weeks of pregnancy, it analyzes certain substances produced by the mother’s placenta. Unlike amniocentesis and CVS, the AFP blood test poses no risk to the baby.

We lay awake for a long time that night. I leaned toward foregoing any testing altogether. After all, what difference did it make to know now or later? Why couldn’t I just enjoy my pregnancy? My husband, however, favored the AFP test, arguing that it would be better to prepare ourselves for the special challenges that a Down syndrome baby would bring.

## Unwelcome advice

I didn’t sleep well that night, and the next day at work I felt exhausted. Finding it difficult to concentrate, I began unloading on the only other person in the office

*Daniel at six months.*



that morning, someone I didn't even know very well. I explained to her that I was considering declining any testing altogether. Her eyes grew wide.

"You've got to be kidding," she said flatly. "Why in the world not?"

Her tone irritated me. "Because the results really don't matter. Even if it turns out our baby does have Down syndrome, we'd never consider abortion."

"But why not?" she said. "Have you thought about what a burden it would be to have a baby like that?"

I had expected sympathy and understanding, perhaps a kind word to ease my heart so I could get through the rest of the day. Caught off-guard by her response, I regretted confiding in her.

Only a few days later, I had a similar conversation with a long-time neighbor. Though not a Christian herself, she knew me to be a believer, so her reaction surprised me. She squeezed my hand and looked into my eyes earnestly. "Honey, society is just so unaccepting of abnormal children. Why would you want to bring one

into the world?"

My back stiffened and I gave her the same response I gave my coworker. "I've been waiting a long time for this baby," I said. "Nothing will stop me from going forward with this pregnancy."

Thankfully, as I shared the unhappy turn of events with family and Christian friends, I received the solid support and encouragement I craved. I found comfort in the knowledge that each day my child was being lifted up to the Lord in dozens of prayers. My husband and I continued the task of preparing our home and making plans for our baby's arrival. This child was God's gift to my husband and me. Whatever came our way, He would carry us through it, and in the end, blessings would abound.

### Good news

Encouraged by my obstetrician, I went forward with the AFP blood test, seeing the practicality of using the results to prepare ourselves, our families and our friends for the child's birth. As I sat in the



*Mr. Bolanos clowns around with his son.*

lab watching my blood drain into a small plastic tube, I closed my eyes and surrendered my child's future to God. A few days later, my obstetrician called. I braced myself as he explained the results. "Your baby's risk of Down syndrome is 1 in 350," he said.

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"It means your individual risk is far lower than what it would normally be for a woman your age. It means the chances are excellent that your baby is normal."

Months later, I gave birth to Daniel, a beautiful dark-haired boy named after the Old Testament prophet. Often at night when he sleeps, I hold him in my arms for a few tender moments and thank God for the blessings of motherhood. And sometimes, searching my heart, I remember the conversations with my less supportive acquaintances. Would I love this child any less if he had been a Down syndrome baby?

As I listen to the soft rhythm of his breath, my heart tells me no. My heart tells me that, if anything, I could only love him more.

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### *Spiritual energizer*

"Procured abortion and homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, and, as such, can never be justified in any circumstance. Although war and capital punishment can rarely be justified, they are not intrinsically evil; neither practice includes the direct intention of killing innocent human beings... One cannot justify a vote for a candidate who promotes intrinsically evil acts which erode the very foundation of the common good, such as abortion and same-sex 'marriage,' by appealing to that same candidate's opposition to war or capital punishment."

—Archbishop Raymond Burke, Oct. 1, 2004,  
The St. Louis Review