



# Like Lions

A MinneStory

Shortly after she was born, a simple pulse oximetry screen prompted doctors to check Aria for a heart defect. Listen to her mother, Melia, and grandmother, Julie, talk about the strength Aria has shown and everything they went through as she fought for her life.



**Melia:** Right away when I looked into her eyes, I knew she had Down syndrome. I had questioned the doctor and I said, “Hey, does she have Down syndrome?” It didn’t matter to me. It never matters to me. But, um, it is definitely something that I wanted to know for sure.

**Julie:** Well yeah, because the minute I walked in, I picked up on it immediately, and they’re denying it. It was really bugging Melia. You could see that.

**Melia:** And as we went down to the NICU, I said to my husband, “You do realize if she has a heart defect, I’m positive she has Down syndrome.” At that point they then did blood work and testing. They did a test called the FISH test and it was confirmed that, yes, Aria had Down syndrome. But also, with an emergency echo, we did realize then at that point that she also had a major heart defect, an atrioventricular septal defect at that time, and that we would be facing open heart surgery in the future. So without that test, I truly in my heart think they would have just sent us home, and we would not have known until later or something went actually wrong with Aria.

Once Aria was able to prove herself that she could eat enough to grow, we were able to go home and then wait until she got to a certain point in her weight before we could do her open heart surgery.

It’s definitely the most intense out-of-body, dream-like experience you could ever imagine, watching a roomful of people trying to bring your child basically back from the dead. It’s something we’ll never forget, but something that’s made us incredibly strong and appreciate life so much more. So much more.

**Julie:** It seems like we went in there like kittens and came out like lions, ready to fight again.

**Melia:** They had a prayer chapel in the hospital and I often, when Aria was in a procedure or having something done in her surgeries, I would go and walk in a prayer labyrinth. I definitely put miles and miles on the prayer labyrinth of either angry and—I had some pretty psychotic conversations with God during the whole event.

**Julie:** Describe your relationship with Aria now that she’s healthy and home and thriving. How do you feel about her love for you and you for her—the connection?

**Melia:** Aria is incredible. Anyone that meets Aria instantly falls in love with her. Her broken heart is the biggest heart you will ever, ever see. She’s beautiful on the inside and the out. She’s just so much joy, yet she’s been through hell. You physically can see—she has scars on her neck, and her thighs, her arms, and she has a huge scar on her chest, yet you can’t help but just think she’s beautiful because she just glows.

I just wish the whole world could see people with Down syndrome, or people with different challenges, through the eyes of a child.

I don’t see it as—Aria is going to have no different of a life than Harper. I’m excited for her future. She’s growing up in a world that 20 years ago people with Down syndrome, you know, had a whole different aspect of life.

I expect her, you know, to live on her own and have a boyfriend and, I expect to plan two weddings. I expect both my kids to go to college. I expect to get mad at both of them and for both of them to get in trouble. And, like I said, I just really wish the whole world could see Aria like her sister sees her. And they love each other. They’re best friends.

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