

## Baby Ava is a bundle of challenging joy

By SAM COOPER  
Republican-American of Waterbury

WATERTOWN, Conn. — As the camera clicks, 10-month-old Ava Jean Perillo's head cocks to the side, and a wide smile spreads across her cherubic cheeks.

Television interviews and calls from reporters have slowed, but life is coming fast at the celebrity infant who has captured so many hearts with her joy for life and angelic demeanor.

Ava has a rare birth defect known as bilateral anophthalmia, in which the baby's ocular tissue, or eyes, do not develop during the first month of pregnancy. It occurs in about one out of every 100,000 children.

These days, Ava is a ball of energy, bouncing wildly in her stationary entertainer as she giggles and coos.

The little girl and her doting parents, Kimberly Osborne and Jason Perillo, have settled into a cozy Watertown townhouse, where Ava's playpen, rocker and high chair dominate the living room and a steady stream of therapists and teachers keep her busy learning the skills she will need later in life. Between house calls and doctor visits, taking care of Ava keeps the young couple on their toes.

"It's good because we know she's up to date with everything, but it is hectic," Osborne said from her living room recently. "There's no training manual for how to raise a child, let alone one with a disability."

Like other infants, Ava has picked out her favorite toys, outfits, foods and in particular, music. Perillo said she probably has more CDs than he does. "It's music, music, music, all day long," Osborne said. "She likes the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, mostly classic rock ... my dad was like, 'no Lady Gaga.'"

She has also begun sounding notes on the piano, they said. "She'll hit a few keys, listen, then wait until the sound is over and then play a few more," Perillo said.

But born in world of darkness, teaching her simple

things like rolling over and crawling has been a challenge. Sight facilitates movement, Perillo said, and because she doesn't see things to pique her curiosity, she doesn't have the incentive to reach out and grab, or explore.

"We're really working on her independence," he said. "She needs to be a much more independent person to be very strong, and secure in herself."

Sometimes, that means letting her figure things out on her own, her parents said, even when they desperately want to help.

It's tough love, but it's the right thing to do, said Michelle Contey, of Stow, Mass., who along with eight other parents of children with anophthalmia founded an online support group called Micro Anophthalmia Parent Support.

"It's just a place for sharing and for being with other people that know what you're going through," she said. "You kind of think, because it's so rare, there's nobody out there that's dealing with what you're dealing with."

Parents don't give out medical advice, but do discuss the pros and cons of various treatment options, Contey said.

Contey's son, Matteo, 8, was born with bilateral anophthalmia and a cleft palate. These days, he goes skiing, kayaking and participates in special needs baseball and swimming. He can really do anything, she said, it just takes a little longer to teach him.

Many parents in the group have attempted to discover what caused anophthalmia in their child, but most of the time they're unsuccessful, Contey said. The defect has been linked to mutations in several genes, as well as the fungicide Benlate.

International chemical giant Dupont Co. has settled lawsuits in Delaware, Britain and New Zealand with dozens of families who had children born without eyes, or with abnormally small eyes.



WILLIAM WOODY/The Daily Sentinel

TIM WITHEE, right, a Kundalini yoga instructor, leads a class for veterans at the Fairmont Hall. John Armendarez, left, participated in a recent class. Withee, a Vietnam veteran, credits Kundalini for helping him through the inner struggles he has faced since the war and thinks it can help others.

## Yoga motion

Teacher thinks veterans can help themselves deal with unseen scars

By AMY HAMILTON  
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In a black T-shirt and black jeans, John Armendarez takes his place on a mat on the floor.

The 47-year-old veteran who was assigned to the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea has never taken a yoga class before, but has been trying new things lately and figures the experience couldn't hurt.

Before class starts, Armendarez raises his left shirt sleeve to reveal a foot-long scar on the inside his arm, an indelible reminder of his service. Hesitant about going into it further, he added, "I've seen some action."

Just like Armendarez, Tim Withee also served his country. Withee, 60, is a Vietnam War veteran and had a rough time recovering from the effects of war until he discovered Kundalini yoga.

Since 2005, yoga has helped Withee cope and now he teaches yoga classes locally in the hope more veterans also can benefit. It's not outward scars, but veterans' inner struggles, where Withee feels he can help.

"A lot of men and women coming back from the war zone have a lot of injuries that you can't see," Withee explained. "When you get home and take that uniform off, everybody expects you to be the same person you were when you went off, but you're never going to be that way. You see terrible things, maybe you even pulled the trigger. Kundalini yoga can help a person recover from a lot of things."

Kundalini yoga, a series



of techniques meant to promote flexibility and increase awareness, was introduced to the West in the 1960s by Yogi Bhajan.

The practice incorporates breathing exercises, meditation and reciting mantras that are meant to relieve stress and prompt serenity. Typically, instructors use a gong at the end of classes that releases a crescendo of reverberations and, as Withee is fond of saying, "scrubs your self-consciousness clean."

Withee wants to invite more veterans into his practice as a way to deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The disorder is labeled an emotional illness that develops as the result of experiencing a frightening or life-threatening situation, a condition not uncommon among war veterans.

Those with the disorder may experience high levels of anxiety and may tend to avoid certain situations that could jog a traumatic memory.

For years, Withee battled his inner demons by trying to drown them in drugs and alcohol, he said.

In 1988, he got sober and has been so ever since, he said.

In 2005, Withee tried Kundalini yoga as he was looking for a way to regain flexibility. Almost immediately the yoga affected him more deeply than providing physical gains. It helped him deal with emotional baggage, he said.

"It raised me to a level that I didn't even know existed," Withee said. "Any age you start is OK. My mom is starting at 83. Obviously, you're not going to get into poses that someone at 22 can get in."

Several forms of yoga have gained momentum in recent years as a treatment option for veterans dealing with the mental and physical implications of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Since 2006, Walter Reed Army Medical Center has used yoga as a treatment.

Yoga also is used at the Grand

### TRY THE CLASS

Kundalini yoga is available at 5 p.m. Mondays at Fairmont Hall, 2511 N. 12th St. Classes are offered on a donation basis, and a suggested donation is \$10.

Junction Veterans Affairs Medical Center to help veterans recover from physical ailments, spokesman Paul Sweeney said.

Withee can understand that there may be a perception of yoga that could keep veterans from trying it. Participants need not wear spandex, but comfortable, loose-fitting clothes are recommended. Participants do not need to be in good physical condition to practice yoga.

"If you can breathe, you can do this," Withee said.

Because Kundalini yoga is practiced largely with eyes closed, an atmosphere of being watched or judged is minimized.

Most classes focus on beginning poses because most participants are beginners, Withee said.

He thinks veterans aren't the only ones who could benefit. Those who have been in jail or prison and those battling substance abuse could be helped.

"It will get you in shape. It changes you and spirituality you're uplifted," he said.

After a yoga class on a recent Monday, Armendarez reflected on the experience.

He was able to do many of the poses and exercises and enjoyed the gong Withee rang at the end of class.

"It's just like he said, it's good for the mind," Armendarez said. "I need this."



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KIMBERLY OSBORNE, 24, and Jason Perillo, 31, of Watertown, Conn., hold their 10-month-old daughter, Ava, who has a rare birth defect known as bilateral anophthalmia, in which the baby's ocular tissue, or eyes, do not develop during the first month of pregnancy. It occurs in about one out of every 100,000 children.

## ST. MARY'S HOSPITAL & REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER'S weeklyreport

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### Grand Valley Health Fair is good healthcare news

Stories about families without healthcare coverage because of the poor economy fill the papers. It's about time for some good news. The 31st annual Grand Valley Health Fair, March 12-13, will provide free and low-cost health screenings and education that can help area residents take better care of themselves.

"These days people want to maintain their health and their budgets," says Samantha Moe, St. Mary's public relations representative, "and they're

Samantha Moe,  
public relations representative

looking forward to the many services the fair offers." Supported by area Lions Clubs, the fair will feature 48 booths staffed by local agencies. The popular low-cost blood screenings will be available both days. This year many area residents took advantage of a new feature and made an appointment to have their blood work done at the fair. Moe says there will be plenty of phlebotomists available to take blood samples for walk-in customers as well.

"St. Mary's looks forward to participating in this fair every year," Moe says. "It allows us to carry out our mission to improve the health of the individuals and communities we serve." ■



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