



FOR KIDS' SAKE!

*Premature Twins Shape the Lives, Service
and Passions of the Simmons Family*

By Cheryl Van Tuyl Jividen :: Photography by Mark Humphries :: Travel photography courtesy of the Simmons family

High school and University of Oklahoma sweethearts Valerie and Gary Simmons had their first son, Adam, in 1994. Another son, Zach, was born in 2002. In between the boys there were miraculous fraternal twins, Ben and Micah, born in 1999. Their delivery by emergency C-section prematurely at 26 weeks gestation would be a fight for life. Weighing in at just one and a half pounds each, they faced formidable odds with only a 25 percent chance of surviving and a profound risk of permanent brain damage.



Valerie, who has a Bachelor of Science in Communications Disorders and a Master's degree in Speech and Language Pathology, knew well the kinds of challenges that could be ahead for the twins. Throughout her career, she has worked with children whose disabilities were related to their births. Thankfully, those fears were not realized. Surfactant therapy dramatically reduced the amount of time they needed on ventilators and the significant chance of lung or brain damage. The wonder medication, developed through funding by the March of Dimes, saved their lives and led the way to full recovery. Valerie praises the organization, "Thanks to March of Dimes research, our twins have no adverse effects even though they were born 14 weeks early. The nonprofit focuses on the health of mother and child, believing every baby deserves the best possible start." It was 77 days before the twins were able to go home but March of Dimes provided ongoing resources, support and guidance. In gratitude of the hope and help they received through the March of Dimes, the Simmons became an Ambassador Family and dedicated volunteers over the years with Valerie and Gary chairing the March for Babies Signature Chef event and twice co-chairing the Celebrity Chef event, and Valerie as a lobbyist to the Texas legislature — a role she continues as needed. Gary has served on the March of Dimes' board of directors.

Regarding the importance of the organization's efforts, Valerie shares her insight, "Currently the research is focused on preventing and treating prematurity. Ten percent of children are born too early. These children are especially at risk for respiratory issues and cerebral palsy. Because I have worked with children with special needs for my entire career, I am especially interested in advocating for them."

In her 20 years as an Easter Seals Rehabilitation Center employee, Valerie has seen how impactful education and assistance can be. "We go into homes of children with special needs and teach the family to facilitate the best possible function for the child. In this way, children receive intervention early in their lives while their brains are still malleable, and families are empowered with tools to continue intervention in a natural environment, so the children are often able to achieve normal function. In my practice, I have had a large number of kids with autism. The Center for Disease Control estimates that as many as 1 in 60 children can be diagnosed on the autism spectrum."

In addition to her related work and support of the March of Dimes, Valerie has provided her time and energies to a remarkable number of San Antonio and Ardmore, Oklahoma organizations focused on children and community. In leadership capacities, she has served as a trustee of the Oak Hall Episcopal School, The YWCA, as a board Education Advisor for the First United Methodist Church, and a court-appointed special advocate. Valerie has supported the children's schools with her service on the Boerne High School Advisory Board for CTE and Cotillion Board. She currently serves as board member of the Autism Community Network.





Gary holds a BS in Chemical Engineering and a Master's in Business Administration, and has worked at Valero his entire career where he is Senior Vice President of Supply, International Operations and Systems Optimization. He has chaired the Valero Texas Open which collectively has raised millions of dollars for children's charities, and has given his time and leadership to many charitable organizations including serving on boards of the Alamo Bowl, San Antonio Zoo, Any Baby Can and the Boy Scouts. Gary has also consulted as an advisor to the president at the University of Texas at San Antonio and is a member of the Engineering Advisory Board.

As much as they've done for the benefit of others, they have been very active with their children's lives. "We have been very kid focused. I'm sure we have participated in every kind of activity! Gary and I have coached sports and taught Sunday School. We have had kids in art, music, soccer, tennis, swimming, track, golf, football, cheerleading, dance, baseball, basketball, etc.," says Valerie.

The Simmons children are now third generation Sooners. Zach, a junior at Champion High School, hopes to attend OU following the lead of his parents and siblings. Adam has a BS from The University of Texas and is currently in law school at OU. Ben is studying Construction Science/Architecture while twin Micah is majoring in Community Health/Pre-med where she is active in charitable works. Her studies and volunteering are inspired by her personal journey says Micah, "I volunteer with the Expressive Movement Initiative organization at OU. Weekly, I and other teachers meet at the J.D. McCarty Center to teach children, ages 3 – 18, three dances each semester. All the kids

have different developmental disabilities. In my first semester I worked with a three-year-old girl with cerebral palsy. She couldn't move her own arms or legs but loved being involved and wanted us to do the motions for her. In my second semester I worked as a support staff member and helped organize the recital and fundraisers to buy the kids shoes, t shirts and costumes. Being a preemie did influence my choice to pursue a medical degree. So many doctors, nurses and countless other people worked together to help me grow without ever really knowing who I was or what I would become. They just wanted me and Ben to grow. I want to help other peoples' babies do the same!"

At home, the family enjoys everything about the Cordillera Ranch lifestyle. "We all love the Ranch because we love hiking, fishing, kayaking and shooting. The boys all play golf and Zach enjoys the tennis activities," says Valerie. Travel is a family passion and has afforded Gary many opportunities to enjoy his hobby of photography. "My favorite subjects continue to be our children and our travels," he says. Together the Simmons have vacationed in France, England, Ireland, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Jamaica, Tanzania and China. Gary adds, "We would love to visit all seven continents someday!"

With a new second home in Winter Park, Colorado, Valerie hopes it will become a family tradition where everyone can gather to ski, hike and fish. There's even room for the family to grow. "We have built two large bunk rooms for future grandchildren! Sooner born and Sooner bred!" ☺

For more information about these lifesaving organizations:
www.acn-sa.org, www.marchofdimas.org, www.easterseals.com.