

# Entire family rallies around young Claire

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strong presence in the household, as well as a friend for Luke.

At 5 years old, her personality is evident to her family.

Without hesitation her father describes her as “opinionated. She has a strong personality.”

Luke and Erin share a love of the sports, and Erin flies into the games with all the energy and determination of a 5-year-old boy.

“Erin is the best fighter,” Luke says of his little sister. “She’s tough.”

“She’s stubborn,” Emily adds, and also describes her as cute.

Erin has an admiration for her older brother and sisters. Playing on the family room floor with them and younger sister Claire, she squeals and giggles. Erin is in kindergarten at JMS. The school has a two-day/three day kindergarten program, so there are days of the week when she is not in school and is at home with her mom and little sister.

The 5-year-old is sometimes at a loss without her older siblings, Teresa says. “Erin cannot wait for them to get home from school.”

## Claire

The youngest Sheaffer child causes a spark to be lit inside their family room at the mention of her name. The glowing words come instantly when they are asked how they feel about Claire, age 2 1/2.

“Aww ... Claire ...” one voice calls out with affection. “Cute.”

“Sweet.”

“Claire’s adorable.”

“I love Claire.”

“She’s smart,” says brother Luke.

Claire’s birth came quickly and with some unexpected events. Teresa, who is a nurse, knew something was wrong when at 36 weeks gestation she was not feeling the baby move. She feared that she would deliver another stillborn.

She says she cried on the way to the hospital, fearing the worst.

“I was sure she had died,” Teresa says.

Claire was born at Holy Spirit Hospital weighing only 4 pounds. Her life was at risk as

various complications arose. Amid all of the tubes and wires there was something else about this baby that was different.

The Sheaffer baby was a Down Syndrome child. One in 800 babies is born with the disorder, according to the website [www.about-down-syndrome.com](http://www.about-down-syndrome.com). Down Syndrome occurs when a person has 47 chromosomes instead of 46. This causes various physical and mental differences.

Claire spent two weeks in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Holy Spirit. She was sent home with a feeding tube since she was still unable to eat naturally. During this time Teresa and Jason had a household of five other children who needed their attention and care, including a 2-year-old and 4-year-old twins.

“People were wonderful,” Teresa says of the community and fellow church members. “They brought meals. We were blessed.”

Since Claire’s arrival into the home she has been a favorite sister among the other children.

“She is so fun to play with,” Grace says.

“They would fight over who got to hold her next,” Teresa says.

Luke lights up as he shares how Claire stands in front of the TV and dances.

“She is pure joy,” Teresa adds.

Not one ill word is used to describe the youngest child. As the Sheaffer children talk about one another they tease and share how one sister annoys the other or how their brother drives them crazy. But Claire is the exception.

The girls lie down in a row on the floor and place Claire in the middle. The girls on either side tickle her and she giggles with all intensity. Big brother Luke eventually gets to hold her as she grabs a ball and holds it up to her face.

## Sheaffer six

Jason admits he was not sure about having a large family. Watching the girls play and laugh on the floor only inches from his feet, he says, “There’s a lot more excitement (with six), and it’s busier. There is never a dull moment. Christmas time is always a lot of fun,” he

adds with a grin.

The couple declared six is the final number for their family even though the children talk about wanting another sibling.

Teresa contemplates the many grandchildren she may gain in the years to come. With the exception of Grace, the children say they want small families.

“Just one would be nice,” Rachel says, “maybe two so they have someone to play with.”

Her twin pipes in, “I want one. That’s it. I don’t want my house to be messy.”

Grace pulls Claire onto her lap and with a pause to think about her own future, says, “It doesn’t matter how many kids (I have) as long as I can adopt a child with Down Syndrome.”



*Sentinel photo by TABITHA GOODLING*

The Sheaffer family includes, from left, front, Grace, dad Jason, Luke; back, Rachel, mom Teresa holding Claire, Emily and Erin.

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