



death sentence (see more on page 190). Ezra had no anal opening, a co-joined kidney, holes in his heart, and a tightened esophagus. Immediately after birth, he was rushed into surgery to get a colostomy bag and a feeding tube, since he could neither ingest nor eliminate. He arrived in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit covered with medical equipment and wearing a black silk sleep mask; he looked not unlike a sickly baby rock star.

Over the next three years, our son endured more than 15 surgeries. In addition, because he wore medical appliances, he had developmental delays and had to attend weekly physical therapy sessions. Then there were occupational therapy sessions to exercise his facial muscles, which were going unused because he wasn't eating.

### A Mom and Pop Operation

We thought nothing could be more challenging than having a sick child in the hospital. We were wrong. Try bringing your sick child home. A typical scene at our house was at 3 a.m., with Ezra screaming while Jeff and I contemplated his gastrostomy tube rash. "Did they say to use jock-itch spray or hemorrhoid cream?"

Jeff moans. "How can I remember?" I mumble. "I just glued his colostomy bag to my shoe!"

**T**hanks to the obscuring effects of large mixing bowls, our viewers never knew I was pregnant. By the time I gave birth, I was just a talking head on TBS's *Dinner & A Movie*. What they also didn't know was that I was now the mother of a child with those two dreaded words attached—birth defects. On camera, my partner, Paul, and I traded barbs and cooked up delectable dishes. Off camera, my husband, Jeff, and I navigated hospital pediatric wards, scheduled surgeries, and presided over a three-year process to repair our son's small body—a journey that has saved his life and transformed our family.

Our baby, Ezra, was born exhibiting symptoms of VACTERL, a set of birth defects that only 40 years ago would have been a



**SAVED BY SMILES** Annabelle Gurwitch battled her son Ezra's birth defects while, in the public eye, she and co-host Paul Gilmartin traded jokes and recipes on the set of TBS's *Dinner & A Movie*.

### Humor Helps

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl noted that the attempt to see things in a humorous light is one of the most important coping mechanisms in a crisis. Amid a regimen that required feeding tubes, catheters, suppositories, and enemas, I began to realize the power of gallows humor. Ezra was a "fixer upper" but a keeper, we joked. Like our furniture from Ikea, he came "assembly required."

As we've learned to laugh about Ezra's predicament, so has he. One difficult day last year, he was stuck in the bathroom for hours, crying and bemoaning his "funky tushy," as we call it. Everyone is unique, I explained, pointing to my different-size ears, which I've always hidden behind hairdos. Now, he laughingly displays my ears

*Continued on page 190*

## LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

When TV host Annabelle Gurwitch's son was born with severe birth defects, she worried her happy days were over. In fact, they'd only just begun.