# Family of injured toddler visits ‘Dr. Phil’

## The parents of 'Baby Izaiah,' left paralyzed by a drunken driver 3 years ago, are still struggling

By Pam Kragen (/staff/pam-kragen/) 5 p.m. Dec. 16, 2013



Parents Jacob Wallis and Lucy Verde tend to their son, Izaiah, at their home in Vista Sunday. Izaiah will be featured on the "Dr. Phil" show on Dec. 17. A teen drunk driver hit Izaiah, who was riding in a stroller pushed by his grandfather in 2010. Known to the community as "Baby Izaiah," the 4-year-old boy is permanently disabled. Jamie Scott Lytle/U-T San Diego

Vista — It’s been a difficult year for the family of 4-year-old Izaiah Wallis, the toddler left paralyzed and brain damaged in October 2010 when a teenage drunken driver smashed into his stroller on an Oceanside sidewalk. But it’s about to get a whole lot better.

At 3 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 17, on KFMB Channel 8, Izaiah’s parents Jacob Wallis and Lucy Verde will be featured on “The Dr. Phil Show.” The Vista couple, who are both 24, hope the national exposure will open some donors’ hearts to their situation. Although Izaiah has made progress in his recovery over the past three years, the cost of electric bills, gasoline, copays, prescriptions and supplies not covered by insurance has his family living paycheck to paycheck.

“It’s been a struggle,” Jacob Wallis said, in an interview on Sunday at the Vista home they share with his mother. “But we are never going to give up on him. We will do everything we can to get him the help he needs.”

During the taping on Dec. 10, therapist “Dr. Phil” McGraw gave the family some surprise gifts, a 2014 Lexus hybrid car and a $10,000 donation toward a fund he is creating in their name. Wallis said the gifts “will be a big help” but they’re most happy about getting Izaiah’s story out once again.

Verde, who works full-time in a clerical job in Carlsbad, said the television taping in Hollywood was an emotional experience. Seeing photos and video of Izaiah before and immediately after the accident revived painful memories. Also during the episode, the couple spoke on the telephone with 20-year-old Noe Hernandez, the driver who struck 18-month-old Izaiah and his grandfather, Abraham Verde (whose ankle was shattered in the crash). Although Hernandez had a blood-alcohol level nearly three times the legal limit, he was under 18 at the time and served 480 days in custody. Last year, the court levied a $55 million judgment against the Hernandezes, but the family said they could only afford payments of $150 a month.

“I’m glad we got to talk to him and ask him questions, but we didn’t feel the sincerity in his voice,” Lucy Verde said of the call. “If you’re going to ruin somebody’s life like that, you could try to comfort the family. They’ve never once called us or written us or showed up to help take care of Izaiah.”

After the accident, Izaiah spent seven months in Rady Children’s Hospital. When he came home, he was paralyzed from the chest down, had severe brain damage, a collapsed lung, a weak immune system, needed machines for breathing and nourishment, could not see or speak and hated being touched. Wallis gave up his job in a bakery to serve as Izaiah’s full-time caregiver (for which he is paid a stipend through insurance).

The family’s guardian angels have been Encinitas residents Linda and Charles Van Kessler, whose nonprofit Passion 4 K.I.D.S. helps children in crisis. Linda Van Kessler — who did P.R. for President Gerald Ford and Rev. Billy Graham — coined the phrase “Baby Izaiah” and has worked tirelessly to keep his story in the public eye (including pestering the “Dr. Phil” producers for the past two years). To date, the charity has raised nearly $160,000 for the Wallis family. Much of that went toward the purchase and renovation of the family’s home in Vista, as well as a used handicapped-accessible van.

“We can’t thank them enough for all they’ve done,” Wallis said. “I can’t even think about where we would be without them.”

Wallis said he’s looking forward to 2014, because this has been a year he’d like to forget. Because of Izaiah’s tracheotomy and collapsed lung, he is prone to bouts of pneumonia and has spent nearly a third of this past year in the hospital. When Izaiah is

hospitalized, Wallis goes without a salary. Money is so tight, Izaiah is the only family member with insurance.

But on the positive side, there are many blessings Wallis and Verde are counting this holiday season.

One is their 18-month-old daughter, Caliah, who Verde said likes to help exercise her brother’s legs, push his wheelchair and give him kisses.

"She is a great joy to Izaiah," Verde said.

Izaiah can now see, he enjoys being hugged and touched, he likes watching “Finding Nemo” on TV, and he can use his hands to play simple games on a tablet computer. Although he can’t speak, and efforts to teach him sign language at the California Avenue School have so far yielded minimal results, Izaiah can smile and clap. He also recently used his arms to drag himself across the floor and can pull himself up to a near-sitting position in his bed.

“When we first left the hospital, we were told he’d be a vegetable for life, but we see his progress and we’re amazed at how far he’s come,” Wallis said.

Van Kessler said she would love to help the family get a new van (with 200,000 miles, its transmission is shot) and build up a savings fund “so they’re not having a financial crisis every month.”

The family would like to take Izaiah to therapy sessions at the Project Walk Spinal Cord Injury Recovery center in Carlsbad. Insurance doesn't cover the cost of visits there, so they're trying to save what they can to get him into therapy there in 2014. To help raise extra money, Wallis has recorded a rap music video about Izaiah and his family's struggles. Viewers can find the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJxgBvn2kjY) on Youtube (search for "Izaiah"). He would like to raise money via downloads and through songs.

“It would be nice to get them a little cushion for the next two to three years,” Van Kessler said. “They don’t need luxuries, they need necessities.”

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