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Super Cooper Run returns Saturday

By KYLE CARRIER

Cooper Fontenot has been through more in his four-and-a-half years of life than most people will experience over their lifetime.

At birth, the son of Mamou natives John and Ashley Fontenot was diagnosed with a severe heart defect - transposition of the great arteries, leading to oxygen-depleted blood in the body.

The result - Cooper had to have open-heart surgery at only nine days old.

"It was like a bucket of cold water being thrown on you," Cooper's father said of the news. "You usually hear about these kind of stories but you never expect it to happen to you. Then the next thing you know you're right in the middle of it and you are that story."

What followed were constant trips to the hospital throughout Cooper's first year of life.

Little did the parents know just how much of a fighter Cooper was. During his speedy recovery, the Fontenot's son earned the nickname "Super Cooper" from his nurses in Lafayette.

Today, John says Cooper proudly displays his scars when asked about the surgery.

Because of their experience, both John and Ashley were determined to help parents who have babies born with an illness. They started the Super Cooper Heart Run to raise money, finding it only fitting that the name be a symbol of their son's fight.

The heart run originated five years ago in Lafayette where the Fontenot's were living. But when John, who works in the oil and gas industry, relocated to Houma for his job three years ago, they brought the Super Cooper Heart Run with them.

With the help of Terrebonne General Medical Center and other sponsors, the Super Cooper Heart Run has been able to raise over \$30,000 since coming to Houma, and a total of \$58,500 since its inception.

"This community has become our family," John said. "They have really embraced what we are doing and have stepped up and given their time to help us out. It's all been great."

Two hundred people ran last year, Fontenot said, making the event larger than it's ever been.

The race returns Saturday, beginning at The Workout Company at 443 Corporate Drive in Houma.

The event begins with a one-mile run kicking off at 8:15 a.m., immediately followed by the 5K race at 8:45 a.m.

"We're gunning for at least 250 people this year," John explained. "We just want this thing to keep growing. We want to help those families in the area who have had to live with what we have."

"We are so lucky and Cooper is a picture of health," his father added. "He still has to see his doctors on a regular basis but if you look at him you would never guess he was sick. It made us realize that some of these families that have children born sick, stay sick. We help them out as much as we can because we lived it and we want to give back as much as we can."

Preregistration for the race has closed, but participants can register on race day from 7 to 8 a.m.

Those who preregistered are also required to be at The Workout Company before 8 a.m. to pick up their shirt, package and race number.

John, Cooper, and Cooper's older brother Remy, are also participating in the festivities.

"They both run the one mile and I'll push the two of them in a two-seater jogging stroller for the 5K," John said. "They love it."

The event will also include music, food, prizes and children's activities such as face painting and inflatables.

Registration is \$20 for the 5K and \$10 for the one mile.

Those who don't plan on running can come to cheer runners on or just hang out, John said. Donations are accepted.

The Cooper Life Fund, a nonprofit organization started by the Fontenots that raises money for children with heart defects, organizes the race.

Proceeds from the event will be donated to Terrebonne General Medical Center's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) to aid families of newborns who have critical medical conditions.

With the money raised over the last two years, the hospital has been able to provide care packages to parents who have had a child admitted into NICU. The package includes diapers, wipes, layettes, premie pacifiers, bottles, gas cards, Boudreaux's Butt Paste, a \$25 Wal-Mart gift card and a restaurant coupon after one week of admittance.

Laura Poole, director of Women's Services for Terrebonne General Medical Center, said the Fontenots' effort to raise awareness hasn't gone unnoticed.

"This very generous donation from the Fontenots enables us to provide a service for these families at a very challenging time in their lives. Not only have the Fontenots provided funding, but also themselves and their time. For each family delivering a baby with a congenital heart defect, they have offered themselves as support and a resource. Their efforts truly come from the heart and I don't think they realize the difference they have made for so many people. They are true heroes."

For more information or to make a donation, call (985) 580-2555, email info@cooperlifefund.org or log onto www.copperlifefund.org.



John Fontenot pushes his son Cooper in a stroller as his other son, Remy, runs alongside. The Fontenots sponsor the Super Cooper heart run to help raise money for families with sick babies. The heart run returns this Saturday with signup at The Workout Company at 7 a.m. * Photo courtesy of COOPER FONTENOT FAMILY