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**Subject:** Hope for HLHS News article on Jessica Fletcher, 22 yrs. old HLHS

Meet Jessica Fletcher: A real survivor -- Area woman beats odds

By RYAN KARP, T-R Staff Writer

Most young adults consider turning 21 a major milestone in their lives.

Reaching age 22 was the milestone for Jessica Fletcher of New Philadelphia. Her January birthday carried so much significance because every year of her life is considered a medical miracle.

Fletcher, daughter of Larry and Ruthie Fletcher, is the oldest person in the country living with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, meaning she was born with only half a heart.

In May, Fletcher underwent what could be the last of four surgeries to correct her underdeveloped heart. Surgeons have reconstructed her heart, which formed without a left side.

"Being that I am the oldest living adult with this condition, I'm still writing the books on it," said Fletcher, who was 5 days old when doctors at the Cleveland Clinic performed an experimental surgery to save her life in 1983. Before Jessica, the surgery was attempted to save five other babies - all of whom died.

"Our option was to hold her until she died or try this surgery," said her father.

At the time, a doctor drew a picture of a heart on a chalkboard and divided it up into quadrants.

"He then erased half of it and said 'I'm sorry. Your daughter does not have this part of her heart,'" Larry Fletcher said. "We were overwhelmed. We thought there was no



Jessica Fletcher looks at a stethoscope in First Assembly of God Church at New Philadelphia recently.

T-R/Ryan Karp

hope. The first surgery was a 25 percent chance that it would work and a 50 percent chance that she would die just having her heart catheterized. At the time, her heart was only the size of a thumbnail."

Amazingly, she survived the surgery, pioneering the way for those later born with the heart defect. She was bombarded by media attention along with the Cleveland Clinic team that performed the operation, led by Drs. Carl Gill and Richard Sterba, who remains her doctor.

"They said they never saw parents who prayed like we prayed and something happened," said her father. "We can't explain it. She was the sickest baby the clinic had ever seen at the time. The Akron Beacon Journal called her a miracle baby, but I think we're all miracles. Life is wonderful, and we just got blessed with Jessica."

Jessica has overcome many of the limitations of her heart condition.

She works as a receptionist at First Assembly of God Church in New Philadelphia where her father is head pastor. She recently completed the medical assistant and phlebotomy programs at Buckeye Career Center and volunteers at the Tuscarawas County Health Department.

She wants to go into the medical field, possibly cardiology.

"Because I've been a heart patient, I know what it feels like to be on the other side," she said. "I know a lot about hypoplastic left (heart syndrome), but there's still a lot I don't know."

Since her surgery, thousands of babies with her condition survive, and doctors have provided a quicker way to save them. They undergo the same series of surgeries that Jessica has but before the age of 6 - with some receiving heart transplants.

Now doctors can detect the heart condition through ultrasounds before they are born.

"When I was expecting Jessica, it was not commonplace to have ultrasounds, so they didn't even recommend it," said Ruthie Fletcher. "Because of her condition, they did ultrasounds on our other two kids. Now it is common."

Jessica has been invited back to the Cleveland Clinic to talk to the parents of children who have the same heart defect.

"When we were done, one of the fathers came up to me and said, 'You've given me hope for my little girl,'" she said. "Just that little assurance was worth the whole hour I spent talking to these parents."

Fletcher continues to recover from her last surgery, resting as needed. Before that surgery, she lived with only 70 percent to 80 percent of the amount of oxygen she should have had. The surgery gave her up to 96 percent.

"To a degree, I've tried to push myself beyond what I could do, but I was beyond that point. I couldn't push any farther," she said.

After the last surgery, she noticed improvements almost immediately.

"We were on vacation last month, and I went for a mile walk with my dad," she said. "Two months ago, I would have been out of breath, but I wasn't tired at all.

"If God can get me through this, he can get me through anything. Nothing is too small for him to take care of for us even down to the tiniest details of our lives."

Even though some with hypoplastic left heart syndrome have had to receive heart transplants, doctors have said this latest surgery could be the last Fletcher may ever need.

"That's a good way to put it - it could be the last surgery," said Larry Fletcher. "They don't guarantee it.

"But they've given us a lot of hope," added Ruthie Fletcher.