Born prematurely, Kennedy defies odds to become piano prodigy

If you sit and listen, you’ll be amazed at how effortlessly the melodies flow from Kennedy Wickers’ piano. Kennedy is considered a musical prodigy. He plays and sings for his family and audiences across the Bluegrass – and he’s never had a lesson.

“I hear the music in my head, and it just comes out of my fingers,” the 18-year-old said.

And while Kennedy’s music is amazing enough, it’s the start of his life that is most incredible.

Born 14 weeks premature to his then-14-year-old mother, Heather, Kennedy faced an uphill battle from the moment his life began. Doctors predicted he would suffer profound weakness, cerebral palsy and significant developmental delays because of his extreme prematurity.

“Eighteen years ago, the advances we have now to support premature babies just weren’t available,” said Nirmala Desai, MD, the Kentucky Children’s Hospital neonatologist who cared for Kennedy after his birth. “It is more common for these very small babies to survive today. Back then the chances were much less.”
Despite her young age, his mother’s pregnancy had been uncomplicated until what she thought were just stomach cramps turned out to be active labor. Doctors at her local hospital tried to stop the contractions without success and transferred her to UK Albert B. Chandler Hospital. There, tiny baby Kennedy was born on Oct. 30, 1995, weighing just 2 pounds, 2½ ounces.

After his birth, Kennedy was transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit where he was given a variety of advanced life-support measures.

“When I was finally able to see him, he was so small,” Heather said. “His skin was so thin, he had IV lines in both hands and both feet, and he was on a ventilator.”

Kennedy would spend the next nine weeks in the NICU, suffering several complications including a Grade III brain bleed on the right side of his brain and, on the left side, a Grade IV bleed – the most severe classification of intracranial hemorrhage. And when he was only a few days old, he also underwent surgery to close an opening in his tiny heart. Doctors predicted that Kennedy would suffer permanent damage.

“There was a high chance of cerebral palsy, and the chance that he would reach normal developmental milestones was highly unlikely,” Desai said. “I’m glad I didn’t have a crystal ball to predict the future. I would have been so wrong.”

On Jan. 7, 1996, more than two months after his birth, Kennedy left the hospital. He continued to wear a heart monitor and receive oxygen for the next year.

“I was told he was developmentally delayed, so to me that meant I had to push him harder to help him achieve,” Heather said. She decided to homeschool Kennedy while he received a variety of therapies and support.

At age 10, Kennedy started to experiment with his dad’s keyboard. It was missing a few keys, but he had already tried the drums and the electric guitar and they didn’t seem to be the right fit. He continued to try piano on and off until age 15 when he became serious about music.

“Everything Kennedy does, he does to the extreme,” his mom said. “He had been watching YouTube videos and studying the player’s fingers, but we didn’t realize he was catching on like he was until he played a Coldplay tune for his homeschool talent show. That’s when we went out and bought him a real keyboard.”

Since that time, Kennedy has learned to hone his talent; he’s performed for a variety of audiences and has dreams to pursue a career in music.

“Kennedy’s success cannot be attributed to just one person,” Desai said. “The doctors, nurses, therapists and his parents worked together for him. Despite his mother’s young age, she was dedicated and attentive. It is not only incredible that he survived, but that he has this uncanny talent as well.”

Heather agrees.

“Kennedy has taught us that everyone has a gift,” she said.

For more information about the KCH NICU, please visit ukhealthcare.uky.edu/neonatology.

And to watch a video of Kennedy playing the piano at UK Albert B. Chandler Hospital, visit ukhealthcare.uky.edu/stories/kennedy-wickers.