

## Strong legs, stronger will

Groundbreaking therapy aims to help three-year-old stand and play with friends, **TIMES EXCLUSIVE:** Ella van Enter is not letting cerebral palsy keep her from the toy box

**Cornelia Naylor**

Special to the Times

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Ella van Enter has been training for an event every bit as difficult for her as an Ironman triathlon is for a seasoned athlete.

For years, she has been training two times a week and she recently started putting in three hours every day.

Ella is three and her goal is to walk.

She has cerebral palsy and for the past three weeks, Ella has taken part in a groundbreaking round of intensive therapy, called TheraSuit therapy, offered in Canada for the first time by Abbotsford physiotherapist Heather Branscombe.

Ella begins her day with warm packs on her legs followed by a routine of massage and stretching.

The rest of her time has been spent in "the suit" - a system of bright yellow bungies and fasteners connected from her head to her feet.

The suit centres Ella's body into a more natural position, allowing her to develop the strength and co-ordination needed for walking, but it doesn't do her work for her.

It's not easy, and there have been tears from Day 1, but Ella has been beating tough odds since before she was even born.

**'THUS BEGINS THE JOURNEY'**

For her parents, Andrea and Rieghardt van Enter, trying to have a baby had been a long and heartbreaking ordeal before they finally conceived Ella and her twin sister.

But their excitement turned to anxiety when an ultrasound showed that Ella's twin was not growing normally and would probably not survive to take her first breath.

A harrowing pregnancy followed, and Andrea spent the last seven weeks of it at B.C. Children's Hospital before the twins were born three months premature.



CREDIT: Cornelia Naylor/For the Times  
 Three-year-old Ella van Enter stands with the support of the groundbreaking TheraSuit as her mother Andrea watches during Ella's final therapy session recently.

Abigail, Ella's twin sister, lived for only five short minutes but tiny Ella was full of life.

"Ella comes out and she's flailing around. Her arms are going nuts," says Andrea.

"She's only two pounds but she's got a mop of hair."

Even as family gathered from both sides to celebrate her birth, new challenges were in store for Ella and her parents.

A week later, Andrea was called in to Children's Hospital where a doctor showed her an image of Ella's brain. She remembers looking up at the image plastered on a wall, doctors and nurses occasionally walking past in the background.

The doctor pointed to two dark spots and informed Andrea that her daughter was going to have cerebral palsy.

"'Cerebral palsy?' I couldn't even wrap my head around cerebral palsy," says Andrea about her response from three years ago.

"Sure, I'd heard about it but nothing in detail. 'She looks perfect,' I thought. 'I don't know what they're talking about.' Thus begins the journey of cerebral palsy."

#### MIXED MESSAGES

Cerebral palsy [CP] is a term used to describe a wide range of disorders affecting movement and muscle co-ordination caused by damage to the brain before, during or after childbirth.

Branscombe describes it as a case of the brain sending too many messages to some muscles and not enough to others.

For Ella, these mixed messages interfere with co-ordination and leave her muscles tight but weak.

While the damage to her brain will not progress, without therapy, tight muscles would eventually damage her bones and joints and prevent her from reaching her full potential, so Ella has taken part in a variety of therapies since she was six months old.

Government resources for therapy are thin and physiotherapy is not funded for children before the age of five.

Andrea believes five is too late and a sense of urgency compelled her to look for extra care at private clinics.

"Her body needs to be massaged and stretched, and she needs physio if we're going to get to point A: sit, stand, walk," says Andrea. At one of these clinics, Abbotsford Physiotherapy, Andrea first met Heather Branscombe.

#### ELLA'S 'VERY DETERMINED'

Andrea approached Branscombe one day to ask her opinion about "suit therapy," a costly, intensive therapy offered only in the United States.

It so happened that Branscombe had only recently completed the training for the therapy, and both agreed that Ella should be her first client.

Branscombe, founder of Abilities Neurological Rehabilitation that will open in downtown Abbotsford on Oct. 1, says in three intense weeks the TheraSuit method is designed to build a base of strength and co-ordination that can be integrated into everyday life.

"Ultimately this isn't the end of it," she says. "This is just for her to build and move forward,"

Ella is not walking yet, but Branscombe is happy with what they have accomplished.

"Ella is very determined," she says.

She is now walking twice as far in her walker, and can stand alone for 12 seconds instead of just one, but for Branscombe, whose son also has CP, it's all about real life.

"She's stronger, and it's great to be strong but why do you want to be strong? So that when she starts preschool, she has the endurance and the stability to . . . stand up and play with her friends for that two-and-a-half hours," she says.

With a difficult three weeks behind her, Ella took the benefits of her hard work to her first day of school at Braun-Tasaurus Preschool on Wednesday.

How was Ella amidst her classmates during her first "circle time?"

"She was just pumped."

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