

Local school boasts six sets of twins

By Dee Ann Campbell
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GILBERTOWN — When Kearrah and Breanna Lewis began Kindergarten last fall, they did it together — just like everything else in their lives. From birth, they've shared a cradle, a family, and now a classroom.

And they share a birthday.

But the Lewis twins are not alone at their school. In what is believed to be an unprecedented number, Southern Choctaw Elementary's enrollment this year includes six sets of twins, ranging in age from Kindergarten through 5th grade. They are part of a growing number of twins born to parents across the country in recent years.

Over the past two decades, there has been a substantial increase in the number of multiple births in the United States. Between 1980 and 1997, the number of twin births increased by 52% and by another 3% from 2002 to 2003 alone.

In addition to the Lewis children, the SCES enrollment includes 8-year-olds Aubrey and Austin Henderson, Joe and John Allen who are almost 7, John and Ransom Phillips who are 10, 11-year-olds Stephen and Stephanie Powe, and Mason and Jason Turner, also 11.

Of the six sets of twins at SCES, none are identical. Although some share very similar features, they are fraternal twins who are decidedly different in their appearances, and in their personalities.

By far, the incidence of fraternal twins exceeds that of identicals. Twins occur in about 12 out of every 1000 births, and of that number two thirds are fraternal.

With genetics one of the determining factors for family who have multiples, most of the SCES twins have relatives who are twins, either in their immediate or extended families.

"I have a brother and sister who are twins," says Amanda Allen, mother of Joe and John. "I knew that there was a good chance I might have twins, too."

Mason and Jason Turner have several sets of twins on one side of their family, but none in the immediate family, while the Henderson boys have twin great-uncles.

"Twins run on both sides of my family," says Yumiko Howard, mother of Kearrah and Breanna, "mainly cousins, especially on my dad's side. I don't know much about other side because my mom was adopted. Someone told me that she might have even been a twin herself."

According to medical studies, race is also a factor that affects the incidence of multiple births. Women of African descent are more likely to have multiple pregnancies. Having more than one previous pregnancy, also increases the chance of having twins, as does the age of the mother. Older women who get pregnant are more likely to have multiples than are younger women.

In recent years, the use of fertility drugs has also greatly increased the numbers of multiple births in the United States.

With the availability of ultrasound and other technology, most parents find out about their multiple babies early in their pregnancies. For many of those families, the knowledge comes as a shock.

"I found out when I



Seeing double at SCES

Choctaw Sun photos by
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Joe and John Allen were born May 17, 2000. Their parents are Amanda and Javie Allen.



Austin and Aubrey Henderson were born on January 15, 1999. Their parents are Chris and Amanda Henderson.



Kearrah and Breanna Lewis were born on July 17, 2001. Their parents are Yumiko Howard and Brad Lewis.



John and Ransom Phillips were born on September 14, 1996 to Turk and Susan Phillips of Gilbertown.



Stephen and Stephanie Powe were born on January 22, 1996. They are the children of Brenda and Terrance Powe of Silas.



Mason and Jason Turner were born to Wanda and 'Red' Turner on July 27, 1995. They live in Silas.

was about 2 months pregnant," says Yumiko. "I cried. I came out and showed my sister the ultrasound and said, 'Look there's two of them!' I didn't know what I was going to do with two babies."

But for Susan and Turk Phillips — parents of John and Ransom — the shock came just two weeks before the delivery.

"Turk kept telling them there had to be more than one in there," laughs Susan. "Finally they did an ultrasound and, sure enough, there they were."

Most twins are not carried full term. The average length of pregnancy for twin births is around 36 weeks for twins — 4 weeks early. In fact, nearly half of all twins are born before the 37th week of gestation.

Premature birth of multiples often means low birth weight and a variety of medical problems such as jaundice, apnea, anemia, respiratory distress due to

They just don't want to be apart."

-- Yumiko Howard

underdeveloped lungs, and neurological problems. But for the twins at SCES, the problems were minimal.

"I had Stephen and Stephanie a month early," says Brenda Powe. "Stephen weighed 5 pounds and 1/2 ounce, and Stephanie weighed 4 pounds, 12 1/4 ounces. They were kind of small, but they didn't have any problems. They didn't have to stay in the hospital any longer than normal."

"My doctor told me I probably wouldn't carry the boys to term," says Amanda. "I had them 5 1/2 weeks early, but they gave me steroid shots two weeks before so that their lungs would develop faster. They had no problems."

For Wanda Turner, giving birth to Jason and Mason was a little unusual.

"I carried them week past my due date," she says. "Then I had Jason naturally, but they had to do a C-section to get Mason."

According to their grandfather Ron Smith, Aubrey and Austin Henderson were relatively average in size at birth, and because of that, they had none of the medical problems that are typical with premature and low birth weight babies.

As with many mothers of multiples, when Brenda was pregnant with Stephen and Stephanie, she was put on complete bed rest throughout the last two months of her pregnancy.

"The doctor took me off my feet at 7 months," she recalls. "I had to have complete bed rest. Even with that, I had them in January but was not supposed to deliver until February."

Although the sheer dynamics of caring for multiple newborns is often a struggle for parents, Brenda says that her twins were on the same schedule from the beginning.

"They were good babies," she says. "They slept all night, and had same schedule for a long time."

Although none are identical, each set of twins at SCES has much in common, say their parents. Each shares an unmistakable bond that began even before they were born.

"They saw a twin can feel the other's pain," says Yumiko. "When the girls were little, Breanna had gotten cut, and Kearrah cried and cried like she was the one who was hurt."

"When they were born, I had to put them together in the same baby bed," she adds. "They had to be touching each other. Later, I got them twin beds, but I ended up having to push them together. They just don't want to be apart."

"Joe and John were in same cradle from the time they were born, even in the hospital," says Amanda. "They would find each other in the bed. We have pictures of them when they were newborns, one with an arm around the other."

Mason and Jason's mother had similar experiences with her twins.

"If you didn't have them touching each other when they were babies, they wouldn't sleep," she remembers. "Then when they got a little older, they would entertain themselves together. They've always had that bond and didn't need toys to keep themselves busy."

For the Phillips boys, the bond has also been evident. Yet there have been obvious differences in personality and interests that have given John and Ransom distinct lives that are separate from each other.

"The boys get along well," says Susan. "But they are totally different. They like different things. One likes hunting, the other baseball. One hasn't leaned on the other. They are very separate."

Although their experiences with bonding were similar when their children were younger, the parents of the SCES twins have differing philosophies about whether to separate their children in the classroom. In some incidences, the teacher and school administration has suggested separating sets of twins, but the decision is ultimately one that is made on a case-by-case basis, with parental input into the decision.

For Amanda Allen, the decision to separate her boys was one that she didn't take lightly. The boys had shared a K4 classroom, but the family chose to separate them in Kindergarten.

"We've thought about trying to keep them together," says Amanda. "But I wanted them to develop independently, to learn how to be individual. They have their own personalities, but until they went to school, John always relied on Joe. Joe did everything first, and John followed. I didn't want them to always depend on the other one."

By contrast, Kearrah and Breanna are together in class, a fact that their mother says has helped both of them to adjust to school.

"They lean on each other," says Yumiko. "It helps both of them to be together right now. But that may change when they get older."

Now in 5th grade, John and Ransom Phillips have also been together since they began school. It was a decision made by their parents, and one that has not proved to increase their dependence on each other.

"They've been together in class the whole time," Susan says. "I requested that. But it helped that they don't look anything alike and they are interested in different things. Even in kindergarten, the teacher said anyone could walk in the class, and no one would know they were brothers."

From the Phillips twins in the 5th grade down to the Lewis girls in Kindergarten, the six sets of twins at SCES are all uniquely different, yet remarkably the same. Whether their children are together in class or separate, the parents of each set of twins describe them as unique in their own right — distinct individuals that are connected by birth and by special bonds that only come with sharing a womb.

"They will probably always have that connection," says Wanda Turner. "They have a bond that will be with them for the rest of their life."