

Family Advisory Council

NICU Family News



NICU Graduate Mason

The NICU Family News is produced by the Shyan Sun, M.D. Neonatal Intensive Care Unit Family Advisory Council. It is designed to provide you with information we hope you will find useful during and after your family's NICU stay.

Did You Know...

...there are some great resources for you and your family in your black NICU Welcome Bag. Take a look and start using them right away! Every bag has:

- A small NICU Resource Guide with all the NICU phone numbers and groups/classes we offer.
- A welcome kit with a NICU Journal, breast milk storage bottles and a cooler bag with ice packs for transporting breast milk.
- Scent cloths, a brochure about the NICU Parent Buddy Program, a hospital patient guide and a board book you can start reading to your baby RIGHT THIS MINUTE!

My NICU Baby is Going Home!

Many NICU parents and staff call the day your baby or babies go home from the NICU their "Graduation Day." This is even more common when your baby has been in the NICU for a long stay of several weeks or months but also applies even when your baby has been in the NICU a few days. Many parents are excited and want to "celebrate" this day but are sometimes unsure how to do so. Others are excited but also struggling with some feelings of worry related to taking baby home to care for them without the terrific NICU staff right nearby. Both of these emotional experiences are normal and sometimes parents have both feelings at the same time.

To follow are some suggestions from NICU Graduate Parents and staff for dealing with both.

Ways to celebrate "Graduation Day:"

- Bring a special outfit/hat for you and/or baby to acknowledge the day.
- Bring a sign or signs to use in photos.
- Call the Bella Baby hospital photographers (862-420-0845) to set up a special photo shoot for you and baby in the hospital before you go.
- Ask your NICU nurse for your baby's **NICU Graduate Diploma** if they have not already given it to you. Take photos with the diploma in the NICU and/or in the NICU Lobby near the graduation banner.
- Take a milestone card from the NICU Library that says "Baby Is Going Home Today" and take pics with that too if you like!
- Leave an inspirational card or treat for other NICU families in the NICU family and sibling lounge.
- Leave a note of gratitude for the nurses/staff to post in their staff lounge.

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Let's Get to Know:

Jessica Villarreal, MSN, RN, CCRN *Clinical Director of CBMC's NICU*

How long have you been working here and in any other NICUs?

I have been working as a NICU nurse for 25 years and have been in my role at CBMC since September 2024. I started in the NICU at NYU as a new graduate and then as a traveler around the country. The last 18 years, I worked at Hackensack University Medical Center as a NICU Charge Nurse.

Where did you do your nursing education/training?

I got my degree at Syracuse University in New York.

How did you know you wanted to be a NICU nurse?

I knew I wanted to be a NICU nurse in high school, when I babysat for an ex-25 weeker preemie and learned how to give lots of medications!

Please describe what your role/responsibilities are in the NICU?

My responsibilities include leading a group of very skilled, compassionate, dedicated nurses to care for our babies. This includes revising policies; reviewing evidence-based practice changes; attending meetings; rounding on staff, visitors, and moms who are patients; performing hand hygiene, wound and PIV audits; making discharge callbacks; and sharing weekly updates and running huddles for staff. I'm also involved with hospital and RWJBarnabas Health collaborations and projects.

What do you like the most about working in the NICU?

I love working with critical patients, and families, and seeing the babies as they grow here and then when they attend our annual Miracle Walk or when they come back to visit. I love critical thinking and management of babies with high medical needs too.

What does Family Centered Care mean to you?

To me, Family Centered Care is about empowering families to become involved in caring for and healing their babies. We work with them as a team.



Do you have any suggestions or advice for NICU families in general or about being involved in their babies care?

My advice to NICU families is to ask questions, take our classes, advocate for your baby, tell us their likes and dislikes, be involved, and communicate with us. This is YOUR baby! Enjoy!

Anything else you would like to say about your job or the NICU?

I love working with a multidisciplinary team and supporting everyone to practice at the highest level of their license or training. We all make valuable contributions to the NICU.

What you like to do in your free time?

In my free time, I like to read, run, and I coach seventh and eighth grade boys lacrosse. I love spending time with my friends, family, and 3 dogs!



Little Victories, One At a Time

Our son was born in September of 2023 — he was three months premature and weighed just over one pound. We spent a total of five months in the NICU. Long days, long nights, weekends, and holidays — all isolated from friends and family.

When people ask how we made it through those five months, I honestly can't say — because I don't remember most of it. I remember everything about the night Mason was born. I remember the weeks leading up to it. We did not expect Mason to be born that early. It wasn't part of the plan. Spending five months in the NICU wasn't part of the plan. All plans went out the window — because life was happening. And it was exactly that: life. This was uncharted territory, different from what most people experience. But it was our journey — the path we were forced to take.

Along our journey, we learned a thing or two. We learned that people in crisis situations — and those who work in them, like the NICU doctors and nurses — are some of the most incredible people in the world. As hard as it was being in the NICU for five months, working full time, and coming to the hospital daily, we started to see things differently. These are the circumstances that bring people closer together.

We'd gather in the lounge or break area with other parents — some camped out on the brightly-colored couches. Complete strangers, yet instant friends, because of a bond created through shared experience.

You realize pretty quickly that these babies entered the world in a different way — through difficulty, some of them fighting for their lives. Maybe it was optimism, or maybe stubborn ignorance, but I didn't really think about it. I didn't mind the long nights or the holidays in the NICU, but as other babies left and ours remained, we couldn't help but feel left behind. When would it be our turn to go?

Friends and family would ask, "When is he coming home?" And the answer was always: "I don't know."

That helped, in a way — because we learned that milestones wouldn't come as expected. Time moved differently. Mason might have been six months old, but developmentally, he was really three months old. That's just how it works — and eventually, it balances out. You learn to take victories one at a time.

In the legendary words of Bruce Lee: "Do not pray for an easy life. Pray for the strength to endure a difficult one."

When the day finally came — about a week after Mason got his G-tube and was cleared to leave — the moment we had waited for during the last five months was filled with mixed emotions. It was hard to say goodbye to all the wonderful people who had cared for him — the doctors, nurses, social workers, respiratory therapists, support staff, even the security guards. One of them gave Mason the nickname "The Mayor" because everyone knew him. When it was time to go, the entire team came to see him off. It felt like a graduation from the NICU.

I thought back to the first week there — to a comment a friend made that, while well-intentioned, didn't quite land. He said he was sorry my family had to go through all this. I know he meant well, but I didn't feel sorry. I felt joy. To him, it seemed the joy had been stripped from the moment — but for me, I had a son.

It made me think of the story of the Chinese farmer and the horse that ran away. You can look the story up online, but the moral of the story is this: the process of life is too complex to know what's good or bad in one moment. You never know what the consequences of misfortune — or good fortune — will be.

Important Phone Numbers

NICU: 973-322-5300

NICU Clinical Director:
973-322-8938

NICU Social Worker: 973-322-5503

NICU Case Managers:
973-322-5909/973-322-2678

Birth Certificate Office:
973-322-5327

Lactation Consultants:
973-322-9088

NICU High Risk Infant Follow-Up Program: 973-322-2631

Spiritual Care Department:
973-322-5015

Want to Help the Family Advisory Council?

The FAC is made up of graduate parents dedicated to helping new NICU parents. We meet monthly to discuss ways to do this. We're always looking for recent graduate parents to share their experiences and ideas to make our NICU the best it can be. We welcome your ideas and participation.

Contact: Hayley Hirschmann
FAC Coordinator
Hayley.Hirschmann@rwjbh.org
973-322-9486

My NICU Baby is Going Home! (continued from page 1)

Ways to try to manage worry about "Graduation Day:"

- Know you are NOT alone in feeling some worry about this special day.
- Reach out to others who have been there to share these worries. Request to be matched with another NICU Parent Buddy/Peer who graduated from this NICU. Use Facebook or Instagram groups including one started by CBMC NICU Parents, of that same name. Check out no-cost virtual support groups in English and Spanish at handtohold.org.
- Try using smartphone apps like Calm, Headspace, Insight Timer, Slumber and others to cope with worry thoughts and anxious feelings.

Little Victories, One at a Time (continued from page 3)

About a year after leaving the NICU, Mason is still on the G-tube. But he's growing, walking, laughing, and living his best life.

It's hard for those who haven't been in this situation — even family — to understand certain things. Like I said before, we don't check off traditional milestones. We just try to take little victories one at a time.

We wouldn't change a thing about Mason. Or about the incredible nurses who supported him. His doctors — Dr. Rani and Dr. Kamtorn — were blessings in our lives. Mason was even one of the final long-stay babies Dr. Kamtorn cared for before she recently retired.

In closing, I leave you with two other helpful thoughts:

- It's said that "Life is the sum of your choices," but I believe it's the sum of your experiences.
- "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." — Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard

Wishing you strength, Mason's Parents

The 25th Annual Miracle Walk Will Be Here Before You Know It!

The 25th Annual Miracle Walk to benefit the Shyan Sun, M.D. Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center will be held on Sunday, October 5 at Verona Park. Bring the whole family and enjoy the DJ, face painting, complimentary bagels/donuts and coffee, all while raising money for our favorite cause.



Learn more and register your family or a whole team now at miraclegwalk.com or facebook.com/miraclegwalk