

Family Advisory Council



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...

you can plan something special for you **NICU baby's "graduation day?"** Some NICU parents feel the day their baby is going home from the hospital is a day to celebrate. They have had personalized outfits made for themselves and/or baby. Some have brought in a mini cap and gown to take photos in with the family. Be sure to stop at the photo banner in the NICU Lobby to take a graduation pic to post (and tag @coopermanbarnabas). Do what feels right for you and feel free to be creative. Afterall, it's your going home with baby day!

nicu Family News

The NICU Family Library

You may not know, but our unit has its very own library for parents and families that is always open. The NICU Family Library is located diagonally across the hall from the NICU Family Lounge as you walk towards the bathroom or POD 1.

This library features three workstations for family use that soon will include new iPads. In the meantime, you can bring your laptop and use the quiet space to catch up on work or return a phone call.

You can find some other special things for families there too.

There are lots of **hand-crafted baby hats** for the taking. If your baby has a hat but you are looking for an extra one or a new size and/or color, please feel free to take one. We are lucky to have many volunteer groups making hats for our babies all year round! There is also a basket of extra **scent cloths** if you need them. If you find either of these boxes empty, please let your baby's nurse know so they can be refilled.

While you are there, check out the **NICU Baby Milestone Cards** and choose the ones that mark your baby's progress and milestones! These cards were created by parents like you who had babies in this NICU in recent years. They wanted to make a special set of cards that you could take one at a time, or all at once if you wanted. They felt like other sets of cards they had seen didn't really fit the needs of the parents in our NICU or were very expensive. They also agreed that celebrating every precious milestone while in the NICU was invaluable and helped them gain a little sense of normalcy while their baby/babies were here.

The library also has recent NICU newsletters, some resource books about NICU babies, multiples and prematurity - and books to read to big siblings. There is also a large TV and magazines to help you pass the time or catch something you did not want to miss on TV.

Our Miracles, Our NICU Journeys, and Our Eternal Gratitude



As another Thanksgiving passes, my heart overflows in a way I can hardly describe. To sit here, surrounded by my husband and our two miracle daughters, both home, both healthy, both in our arms feels like a blessing I once only dared to pray for.

My husband and I always dreamed of growing our family, never imagining we would walk through the heartbreak of infertility. In early 2021, after years of trying, my OB-GYN referred us to the Infertility and Reproductive Medicine practice located inside Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center (CBMC). At age 31, I learned both of my fallopian tubes were blocked. IVF became our only path forward.

Through every injection, every appointment, every emotional high and low, my husband stood by me. I thought IVF would be the hardest thing I'd ever do, but I didn't yet know what motherhood had in store.

After years of trying, after our third embryo transfer, we finally saw the word we had waited a lifetime for: PREGNANT. It felt like God had finally whispered, "It's your turn."

Our First Miracle — Born at 32 Weeks (2022)

The pregnancy was not easy from the start. Because of high blood pressure, I was referred to Maternal Fetal Medicine (MFM) for weekly appointments. Then twice weekly. Then, at 25 weeks, the devastating diagnosis of Fetal Growth Restriction. I blamed myself. I questioned everything. I wondered if somehow I had failed her.

Was I not eating enough? Did I do something wrong? The fear, the uncertainty, the guilt, it was overwhelming. I learned to pay attention to percentiles, Dopplers, amniotic

fluid, and especially kick counts — even though I barely felt her at all. No kicks, no strong movements like other mothers describe. Only soft fluttering, like a feather brushing from within.

At just 32 weeks gestation, everything changed. During my routine MFM appointment, the ultrasound tech stepped out, and in that moment my heart knew. The doctor came in and calmly said the words that would change our lives: "Andrea... the moment is here."

I drove to CBMC in silence, praying, holding onto a calm that could only come from God. My husband rushed to meet me. When he hugged me, the tears finally came — tears of fear, hope, disbelief, and love all at once. Less than an hour later, our first daughter was born. At 2.7 pounds and 16 inches, she was tiny, pale, fragile, and wrapped in a sterile plastic bag to protect her warmth. I didn't hear her cry at first. But then I heard the faintest sound — one I thought belonged to another baby — but it was hers. My miracle's first breath of strength.

She was rushed to the NICU seconds later. That's all I got before she was swept away by the NICU team. Seconds to memorize her face, her softness, her fight. My heart broke as I lay in recovery with empty arms, knowing my baby girl was somewhere else fighting.

Walking out of CBMC with empty arms a few days later felt like my heart was being torn from my chest. It felt unnatural, wrong, painful in a way that doesn't have a name. My body ached because it expected to hold her. My soul felt split in two; half of me walking out the door, the other half staying behind in an incubator.

That first night home, her empty crib crushed me. I cried silently, I felt guilt, grief, fear, and helplessness all tangled together. I wanted to be in two places at once — healing my body after major surgery and yet longing to be beside my daughter every second.

Her NICU stay lasted 36 days, and every day I was there. I lived in her room; holding her tiny body against mine, pumping milk, singing, reading, offering every ounce of love I had. The scent cloths became my treasure. The nurses, my lifeline.

Every day I passed Turtle Back Zoo on the way to the hospital, I would whisper, *“One day I will travel this road not to the hospital — I will bring you here.”* And when she turned one, we did. It felt like the beautiful end of a chapter.

Our Second Miracle — Born at 31 Weeks (2024)

We thought our NICU chapter was complete. But in early 2024, we found ourselves staring at a positive pregnancy test — something we believed was impossible. With both tubes blocked, it felt like a miracle! I was scared, yes — my first baby was only 20 months old — but my heart knew this blessing came with purpose.

This pregnancy felt peaceful — until it didn’t.

The pregnancy was beautiful, smooth, and filled with peace. At 28 weeks, we celebrated our very first baby shower, surrounded by love, joy, and blessings. For the first time, I got to experience what I had missed before — the celebration of bringing a baby into the world. But the day after the shower, our hearts shattered again. Another ultrasound. Another pause. Another look. Another doctor entering the room with that same serious expression.

Our second daughter also had Fetal Growth Restriction. Steroids were given. Dopplers scheduled. On September 26, 2024, our MFM physician saw reversed blood flow and immediately sent me to CBMC. This time, there was no rush. Instead, there was waiting — long, emotional, lonely waiting. Twelve days in antepartum. Twelve days away from my first daughter. Twelve days of nurses checking monitors, adjusting belts, trying to find the rhythm of my baby’s heart as it grew harder each day.

One day in early October of 2024, the feeling in the room shifted. I knew. Everyone knew. The moment had come again. Our second daughter was born that day at 31 weeks, weighing 2 pounds, 8 ounces, measuring 15 inches of pure



bravery. And again, I had to walk out of the hospital without my baby. The emotional pain was familiar, but not easier. Leaving her behind reopened every wound from 2022. I cried all the way home — grieving the moment I didn’t get, grieving the separation, grieving how motherhood had started for me twice.

Her NICU stay lasted five weeks, and this time, the challenge was different. I had to split myself in two — one child at home, one in the NICU. It was exhausting, heartbreaking, and beautiful all at once. And still, the nurses and staff carried us, supported us, encouraged us through every tear and every milestone. She graduated and came home in mid-November of 2024, just in time for the holidays — just in time to complete our family of four.

We are Forever, Eternally Thankful

Thank you to our family and friends, who were always at the heart of our daughters’ medical journey — who stayed updated, who cared deeply, and who helped us in unimaginable ways.

Thank you to every nurse, doctor, ultrasound tech, respiratory therapist, maintenance worker, security guard, and member of the CBMC team. Thank you for saving our daughters and for saving us. Your compassion, your kindness, your gentle words, like “You’re doing a great job, Mommy,” meant more than you will ever know. You became the hands that held our babies when we couldn’t. You became our strength when our hearts were breaking. You became our family when we walked those halls with heavy steps.

Today, our miracle girls are 1 and 3 years old and are home. Safe. Thriving. Laughing. Growing. A dream that once felt impossible is now our everyday life — and we cherish it with every breath. We are, and always will be, **grateful beyond measure.** - Ariela and Anahi’s Mom

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

Save The Date
26th Annual Miracle Walk
Sunday, October 4, 2026
Verona Park
Learn more:
miraclewalk.com

Let's Get to Know Our New Neonatologist: Sarah M. Sánchez, MD

What is your educational/professional experience?

I completed my undergraduate education at the University of Pennsylvania and after graduation, worked in clinical research for five years at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. There, my work focused on epilepsy clinical trials and research related to pediatric cardiac arrest and seizures in the NICU, PICU and CICU. In the process, I fell in love with clinical research and decided to pursue medical school. After graduation, I completed my pediatric residency at Atlantic Health System and a Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine fellowship at Westchester Medical Center at New York Medical College in Valhalla, NY, a large level IV NICU. I was chief fellow during my third year and responsible for the education of medical students during their third-year pediatric clerkships, as well as the training of over 40 residents and 14 fellow trainees.



How did you know you wanted to be a Neonatologist and/or work in the NICU?

I always knew I wanted to be a pediatrician. I adore kids and think they are so resilient and amazing and being able to keep them healthy has always been a professional goal of mine. My dad was a pediatric cardiologist, which also influenced this decision. I grew up going on consults with him in the NICU and nursery and loved the babies. My job was to hold the pacifier and keep the baby calm while he did the echo-cardiogram tests! Also influential to me was my uncle who is a neonatologist, and I remember going to the NICU with him and seeing the babies in their isolettes and being so confused why they were separated from their mothers. It wasn't the typical picture of a new baby with his/her mom. Realizing that healing the babies meant that they could be reunited with their mothers was so motivating. I loved my NICU rotations in medical school and residency and knew it was the perfect fit for me.

Do you have any suggestions for the NICU families?

Yes! Be involved with your baby! Read to your baby. Sing and talk softly to your baby. When staff say it's okay, do lots of skin-to-skin holding (also called Kangaroo Care). Be an advocate for your baby and ask lots of questions – especially if something is not clear to you. The staff are here to answer your questions, so you are more than comfortable to take your baby home and care for them as soon as they are discharged.

Is there a personal or fun fact about you that you are willing to share?

I am a fourth-generation physician and the first female physician in my immediate family. I also come from a huge family and have 30 first cousins. Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center has a special place in my heart because many of my family members, including my cousins, delivered their children here and many family members rely on this hospital for their medical care.