



High Risk Hope helps moms, infants

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SARASOTA — It's a flop to be proud of.

#bellyflopforbabies is the social media campaign that had everybody from doctors to kids to the family dog diving, belly first, into water and posting the videos online to raise awareness and funds for High Risk Hope, a nonprofit that focuses on expectant mothers dealing with high risk pregnancies and premature birth.

For the upcoming Giving Challenge, High Risk Hope is hosting family friendly event Storytime and Sweets at Bayfront Park on Wednesday at 10 a.m. The Giving Tree will be read aloud to highlight the value of giving and the power to make a change.

"You're never too small to make a difference. Some of the first preemies we've helped are old enough today to participate by attending the storytime event. We're always trying to involve our VIPs—very important preemies—in our fundraising," High Risk Hope fund development manager Bailey Nicholas said.

It's the first year High Risk Hope joins the Giving Challenge. The goal is to raise \$3,000 to \$5,000.

Each year, about 1 in 10 mothers in the country experience pre-term delivery. And the numbers in Florida are no better. Preterm births occur at a rate of 9.9 percent, earning the state a “C” grade, according to the March of Dimes.

Premature birth is the leading cause of infant death, meaning the need for High Risk Hope’s services are acute. While hope may connect them, many hospital-bound moms on bed rest or with babies in the neonatal intensive care unit feel isolated. When Kate DeSantis crossed paths with them during her postpartum stay at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, she says it was hard to engage.

“In a trauma you tend to isolate and cave in,” she said.

And there was no local support for mothers and babies hurtled into the uncertainty that comes with high risk pregnancies and premature birth.

Masking a difference

DeSantis’ daughter, Rosie, was born by emergency C-section six weeks before her due date. After two previous full-term pregnancies, it came as a shock, and although DeSantis had the support of her husband and family, she saw other mothers who weren’t as fortunate.

That’s why she formed a Sarasota chapter of the Tampa-based nonprofit High Risk Hope in December. Volunteers provide support and resources to women and families experiencing high risk pregnancy throughout their hospital bed rest, potential premature birth and neo-natal intensive care unit (NICU) stay.

Today, about four volunteers work with Sarasota Memorial Hospital staff to coordinate “Bed Rest Basket” dropoffs and visits to moms on bed rest or with babies in the NICU. Although numbers fluctuate, the NICU has about 30 babies there at any given time.

The bags are filled with simple comforts that a mother anchored to the hospital can’t get for herself, such as baby wipes to clean themselves while on strict bed rest, lip moisturizer, a journal and a calendar showcasing thriving babies who were born prematurely.

Moms can use the calendar to countdown the days before heading home and make a note of successful milestones for both mother and baby, DeSantis said. Sometimes it's other gifts that stand out.

Leopard print slippers were Karyn Bersch's favorite High Risk Hope gift. She wore them everyday while on bed rest pre and postpartum – 13 weeks total.

At only 20 weeks in her pregnancy with her second child, she was diagnosed with Vasa Previa, a condition with a high risk of stillbirth, and was put on hospital bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy.

Following delivery, her son Kellen spent six weeks in the NICU.

But “It's not so much about the stuff. It's about someone coming to you who says, ‘Hey, we're here and we know what you're going through and we can help you through this situation.’”

Today, Kellen is a healthy 2-year-old and a blue arm cast shows his mobility is right on schedule.

Both mothers credit their outcomes in part to a positive attitude, and volunteer their time to High Risk Hope to be part of those outcomes.