



PARENTS

Inspiring calendar shows healthy kids who spent months in the NICU

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TODAY

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At 15 weeks and three days pregnant, Marni Harkness, now 36, prepared to say goodbye to her unborn daughter, Chelsie.

Her water broke prematurely and doctors treating her at St. Joseph’s Women’s Hospital in Florida said labor was inevitable. “We grieved a baby we hadn’t even lost yet,” she told TODAY. “We sat there praying for it to happen quickly and without infection.” Marni learned there was a less than a 1 percent chance that her baby would survive — “I remained positive that she and I could do this together.”



Watch these NICU babies, now feisty toddlers, in their inspiring calendar photo shoot

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While on hospital bed rest, a volunteer from a nonprofit group called **High Risk Hope (HRH)** gave her a “**bed rest basket**” — a care package that contained items a high-risk expecting mother might need while confined to a hospital setting: toiletries, a daily journal, a hospital term glossary, a pedicure set, ear plugs and an eye mask.

“Having [the] support baskets ... meant hope, it meant there are other women who have been in my shoes,” she said. “It’s the smallest things that mean so much in these hard times.”

Chelsie’s heartbeat remained strong and after nearly five months on hospital bed rest, Marni gave birth at 34 weeks.



Courtesy Marni Harkness

Marni Harkness with daughter, Chelsie, in the NICU at St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in Florida. "She needed a ventilator for her slightly underdeveloped lungs," Marni recounted of Chelsie's condition. "She also had hyper extended knees from being stuck in the same position for 19 weeks."

After 25 days in the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, Chelsie finally joined her family at home.

Now she is a happy, healthy 14-month-old who is featured in this year's High Risk Hope babies calendar, celebrating premature infants who spent weeks in the NICU at St. Joseph's Women's Hospital and are now thriving toddlers.



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2-year-old Chelsie Harkness poses with her NICU photo for the 2017 High Risk Hope Babies Calendar.

'Shift the focus from negative to positive'

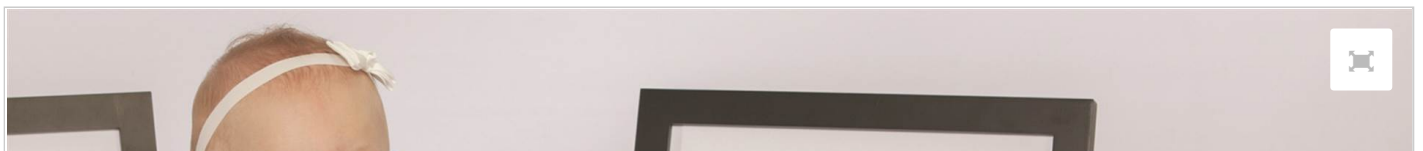
Heather Barrow, 37, founded the organization in 2011 — after spending 59 days on hospital bed rest herself before delivering her premature son. She started the group with a mission to provide support and education for women experiencing high-risk pregnancies resulting in hospital bed rest, premature birth and neonatal care after delivery.



Courtesy of Heather Barrow

Heather Barrow, founder of High Risk Hope, holds her premature son in the NICU at St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in Florida in 2011.

The group's volunteers — many of whom experienced the same circumstances — deliver the specialized bed rest baskets and NICU napsacks to empower mothers and families with the items they need to help bond with their infants in the hospital. The **napsacks** contain items like a parent handbook for understanding the NICU, baby books to read to their infant, hand-knitted blankets and caps, even a superhero cape and coloring books for older siblings.





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See funny outtakes of preemie babies from "High Risk Hope" calendar

Hysterical outtake photos of preemie babies posing for the 2017 High Risk Hope baby calendar.

The Florida-based nonprofit reaches 2,500 women and families every year across six hospitals there and in California. “We send [them] to offer a little bit of light in a very dark room,” Barrow noted. “We hope to shift the focus from negative to positive.”

And positivity defines their latest labor of love. More than 50,000 friends and family members associated with the group cast their votes for the 13 toddlers who were featured in this year’s calendar.



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Amelia Richter, Slade and Avelyn Marigol, Zion Steen and Emmitt Bedocs sit next to their NICU photo for the High Risk Hope Baby Calendar shoot in Florida.

“It was designed to deliver daily inspiration to families as they look at beautiful, healthy HRH babies who have made the journey from hospital to home,” said Barrow.

'Empower yourself, advocate for your baby'

This year’s cover baby, Lukas Sheppard, now 3, was born at 27 weeks and spent 93 days in the NICU, battling blood in his lungs after a procedure that left him surviving on an oscillator and ventilator. “We couldn’t hold him until he was 21 days old,” his mother, Dayna Sheppard, 27, told TODAY. “Before that, we could only put our hands through the isolette to console and speak to him ... I [inserted] a stuffed animal I put in my shirt so he could smell me.”



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3-year-old Lukas Sheppard holds his baby picture where he spent 93 days in the NICU after he was born in 2013.

The first-time mother stressed the value of the volunteers and the NICU napsack during her “roller coaster” experience.

“It was a terrifying situation where you don’t know what the prognosis looks like,” she recalled. “There are so many acronyms and words [doctors] use ... [High Risk Hope] explained the different procedures — you know every abbreviation, every term.”

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Parents shouldn't feel helpless while their infant spends weeks or months in the NICU, she said.

“Empower yourself, advocate for your baby and how you want them to be cared for,” she said. “Mothers don’t have to feel alone watching your child fight for his life.”

don't have to feel alone in watching your child fight for his life.

'All things are possible with the right attitude and perspective'

Acquanetta Hunt, now 34, was pregnant with twins and delivered one — Grace Linda — as stillborn in December 2015. She immediately went on hospital bed rest, hoping that her remaining twin could survive until his due date the following April. "It was a sad and frightening period for me, having strict bed rest orders and the unknown certainty of Elijah's health and arrival," she told TODAY.

Elijah decided to make a surprise appearance on New Year's Day, four months early. Born at only 2 pounds and 8 ounces, he remained in the NICU for 60 days before going home.



Courtesy of Acquanetta Hunt

Elijah Hunt spent 60 days in the NICU at St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in 2015.

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Elijah's mom said the emotional support she received from the High Risk Hope volunteers during her son's time in the NICU enabled her to bond with him and learn from others who survived the same traumatic circumstances. "Having a baby in the NICU was an experience we were not prepared for," she recounted. "[The volunteers] helped ... strengthen my faith that all things are possible with the right attitude and perspective."



photos by TheGalleryStudio.com

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Elijah hunt poses with a picture of himself as an infant in the NICU at St. Joseph's Women's Hospital in Florida in 2015

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