

preemie parents pay it forward

Families of the tiniest babies join forces to comfort and support one another. *by Christina Boyle Cush*



▲ TTMF helps the families of babies like Jayden, who was born premature.

Opening the door of the Stepping Stones Museum for Children in Norwalk, Connecticut, on a recent Sunday, you would have seen smiling children running from the face painting station to dance with the band, and then to the temporary tattoo booth. The museum was the perfect place to host a reunion for The Tiny Miracles Foundation, Inc. (TTMF), an eight-year-old nonprofit that helps over 1,200 local families with premature infants in and around Fairfield County, Connecticut. Most of the families at the museum have survived one of the toughest challenges of their lives: they have had at least one baby who was born very prematurely and had to spend a chunk of time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of a local hospital.

At the party, TTMF Board President Leelee Klein floated from family to family, marveling at how big all the kids had grown. Klein's own twin daughters, Grace and Larsen, were born at 26 weeks gestation in 2000. "I know from personal experience that the premature birth of a child can be a shocking, isolating, and frightening experience," says Klein, who has served on the TTMF board for seven years. "Although area hospitals are able to meet most premature infants' medical needs, the emotional and other needs of the family during this fragile time often go largely unsupported. TTMF seeks to fill this void."

TTMF is uniquely comprised of parents of preemies who are trained as mentors to offer comfort, support, and hope to new parents of preemies. Some other services TTMF provides in four local hospitals: Family Resource Rooms (with a preemie research library, a kitchenette, toys, and other distractions for siblings); Welcome Bags and Homecare Starter Kits (with a fleece isolette cover blanket to comfort the baby in the NICU, a bonding doll to ease separation anxiety, and preemie-size essentials); and financial assistance (small emergency grants to help defray nonmedical costs associated with having a preemie).

HELPING IN MANY WAYS

When Stephanie Hypolite's son Jayden was born at 25 weeks gestation on September 10, 2010, he weighed only one pound, five ounces. After three days at Stamford Hospital in Connecticut, Jayden was transferred to Yale New Haven Children's Hospital's newborn special care unit because he needed a high-quality ventilator. TTMF mentors at Stamford Hospital met Hypolite when Jayden was born to give her a Welcome Bag. "When TTMF learned that Jayden was being transferred to Yale, we knew Stephanie would need more help," says Klein. Hypolite's husband was in Haiti and her father worked full-time, and she got some financial assistance from them, but she was recovering from Jayden's birth and had no car. TTMF drove her to her first visit with Jayden at Yale, which is about an hour from Stamford, and stayed with her while she got to know his new home.

Over the next few weeks, TTMF funded Hypolite's transportation costs so that she could see Jayden. She eventually secured housing at the Ronald McDonald house near the hospital. TTMF stayed in touch with her during that time and sent Jayden clothes as he grew.

During the first few months of his life, Jayden had a tough time: he received 12 blood transfusions; had to get a tracheotomy tube ("trach"); and was ventilator-dependent. Things turned around one month after his first birthday, when the trach was removed—and he was finally able to go home. Since Hypolite hadn't worked in over a year, TTMF paid for her security deposit on a new place, plus her first month's rent. Jayden was released from the hospital on November 4, 2011, still on oxygen, and settled into the new crib that TTMF provided. Today, he is an active and chatty 2½-year-old, who weighs almost 30 pounds and is oxygen-free. "He is a miracle to me," says Hypolite. "The support I received from TTMF helped me believe that my little baby was going to make it."

For more information about TTMF visit ttmf.org. ●