

Family rallies community to help keep Southlake's littlest patients ?Homeward?



As they prepared to welcome their twin girls, Wendy and Chris Neal visited Southlake Regional Health Centre to learn what they thought was all they needed to know before delivery.

Looking back, one of the most vivid memories of this particular visit was walking through a very small room and being told not to worry about it.

That's where high-risk births were in case they need to be flown to Toronto's SickKids hospital, they were told, but they couldn't have anticipated at the time that 36 hours after welcoming Sarah and Zoe, they'd come to know this room intimately ? and one of them would be accompanying their newborn on that terrifying journey into the unknown at the Toronto hospital.

?Wendy's water broke around 11 p.m. on a Sunday and we tore up to the hospital not having slept yet and we barely slept that night because she was high-risk with the twins,? says Chris. ?We were on monitors and nurses were coming in every 20 minutes. Wendy gave birth to Sarah at 12 noon the next day and late that night, Wendy called and woke me up and said, ?We have a bit of a problem. You need to be here.?It's a call no parent wants to get ? or make ? but that was the reality of the situation.

They were separated, their girls were separated, but they got the help they needed.

22 years later, Chris and Wendy were recently back in that room ? this time to properly assess the needs of Southlake's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and Birthing Unit while they take on the roles of Lead Community Volunteers to help raise \$2 million for new specialized equipment for the hospital.

According to Southlake, existing equipment in the NICU is outdated and needs to be upgraded and replaced to ?continue delivering leading edge care.?

?For an infant no bigger than the palm of your hand, every piece of equipment must be tailored to their uniquely delicate and fragile bodies,? says Southlake. ?From monitors that measure the faintest breaths and heartbeats to beds that offer much-needed warmth and protection, to specialized care stations that provide lifesaving intervention close at hand, this advanced equipment is intricate and costly.?

The mission to raise these much-needed funds is called 'Homeward,' a reflection of Southlake's mission to provide critical care close to home and, as much as possible, eliminate the need to have to separate families in order that vulnerable newborns get the care they need.

'Wendy and Chris have a longstanding history of support for Southlake as donors and volunteers,' says Jennifer Ritter, President and CEO, Southlake Foundation. 'They are outstanding leaders who have deep roots in our communities. We are extremely grateful to Wendy and Chris for taking on these roles and know their experience with and commitment to neonatal care at Southlake will go a long way in helping us achieve our \$2 million fundraising goal.'

This is not the first time the Aurora-based Neal family has stepped up to help Southlake. As co-owner of Neal Brothers foods with brother Peter, Chris partnered with Michael Croxon, CEO of New Roads Automotive, to raise \$30,000 for Southlake's COVID-19 Action Fund.

When he and Wendy were approached to lead the Homeward campaign, the choice was clear.

'It really was a no-brainer,' says Wendy. 'The hospital has been so important to us and we're so fortunate to have such a great hospital basically at our doorstep. In view of what we experienced just with our own twin girls, it was clear. When we knew we were having twins, we did the whole tour of where we would give birth. Knowing it was a high-risk pregnancy, it was nice to know Southlake ' York County Hospital at the time ' had all the needs we thought we weren't going to need. Who knew we would actually use all the places that we had?'

Sarah and Zoe were born prematurely at 36 weeks. Sarah was born first weighing six pounds nine ounces, and Zoe thirty-three minutes later at six pounds three ounces. Sarah experienced bleeding on the brain and Zoe had jaundice. It was more than two weeks, and lengthy journeys back and forth between Southlake, SickKids and home, before the girls were out of hospital.

'Suddenly we were in this critical situation; you're panicking and you're relying on the calm of the people around you ' the staff, the nurses, the doctors,' says Chris. 'I would go down [to SickKids] and spend the day down there and come back and try to see Wendy and Zoe, go home, to keep up with business. If we can do everything we can at Southlake to minimize those events from happening, there's always going to be critical care above and beyond what Southlake can handle, but to minimize that and have as few young families go through what we had to go through, that's the goal.

'We're at a point in our lives where our children are older and we can commit some time and resources to helping a campaign like this happen. It is almost a way for us to continue to give back to a facility that was so great to us and continues to be so great. I think it is an opportunity for the community to pay it forward.'

'We got the best care at the time,' adds Wendy. 'But the demand is greater now, too. If we can help them maintain and get better equipment, I think we can only offer better care as a result.'

For the Neals, the point was driven home when they had the opportunity to revisit the unit and saw that some of the equipment that was deployed when they needed it still being used.

It is important to stress, they say, that once the Province pays for the bricks and mortar of building a hospital, it is up to the community to raise funds for the necessary equipment to provide the healthcare itself.

On average, 2,600 babies are born each year at Southlake, or an average of five births per day. 20 per cent of these births, they say, need NICU care.

Thanks to the team at Southlake, Zoe and Sarah are healthy, enjoy active lifestyles, and are in their final year at Queen's University.

'Southlake is a very important part of our community,' says Wendy. 'Having a hospital that provides leading edge care close to

home is a tremendous asset. Our girls faced incredible challenges at the beginning of their lives. They were cared for and could live because Southlake had the right tools and technology at the right time.?

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