

## Homeward campaign a success for Southlake, local family



Southlake Regional Health Centre has reached the conclusion of its \$2 million Homeward Campaign, which aimed to collect much-needed funds for much-needed equipment for the hospital's birthing unit and the campaign went over the top with more than \$2.5 million reached to date.

Helping to lead the Homeward Campaign at the community level were Aurora residents Chris and Wendy Neal who know all too well the importance of having top-notch maternal and child care close to home.

"We are so incredibly proud to have led this important campaign for our community," said Wendy Neal. "Southlake has a special place in our hearts, having cared for our twin girls in the NICU over 20 years ago when they needed it most. However, we know that more advanced equipment has become available since then. When we think of our children potentially having kids in the future, it is impossible not to be affected by the idea that without the community's support, they might rely on the same equipment that their parents used."

Added Chris: "Families in our community should have access to the very best, so to be able to give back, honouring that advanced and compassionate care we received means the world. We're so grateful to all the donors who stepped up to lend their support."

As the Neals prepared to welcome their twin girls more than 20 years ago, they went to Southlake to learn more about what to expect. One of their most vivid memories of this visit was walking through a small room and being told "not to worry about it."

The room in question is where high-risk births took place in case they needed to be flown to Toronto's SickKids for help.

Less than 36 hours after welcoming Sarah and Zoe, that room they weren't supposed to worry about was at the forefronts of their minds.

"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," Chris told The Auroran at the start of the Homeward Campaign in 2022. "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. Chris and Wendy were separated, their girls were separated, but they got the help they needed.

It was 22 years before they were in that room again but this time it was for a good cause: to make sure parents, and their children,

wouldn't have to go through the same thing.

Fundraising for the Homeward Campaign has enabled Southlake's Maternal Child Care Program to replace integral equipment and tech in its Birthing Unit and NICU.

“As a Level 2C NICU with ability to care for infants born as early as 30 weeks, equipment for these areas is highly specialized and purpose-built for Southlake's tiniest patients,” says Southlake. “Since the inception of the campaign, generous donors have enabled Southlake to purchase new infant warmers that use radiant heating to keep babies warm, state-of-the-art incubator care stations that provide continuous warmth to newborns while promoting the growth and stability of babies, and NICU care stations designed to address premature babies' changing and complex care demands. In addition, the hospital has replaced fetal monitors that watch mom and baby's vitals during the birthing process, has expanded the hospital's obstetric ultrasound capacity, and will soon leverage centralized monitoring in the Birthing Unit so that clinical staff can view all patient vitals.

“Having access to this level of advanced equipment is truly a game changer for our hospital,” said Puneet Sandhu, Director of Surgical, Maternal Child and Pediatric Programs. “This equipment empowers us to respond swiftly and efficiently to critical situations, ensuring newborns receive the care they need during those vital first moments of life. These critical upgrades give our talented clinical team the ability to handle emergencies with even more confidence, as they provide increased precision and continuous monitoring of the little ones in our care. We're so grateful to our community for supporting these important improvements, and are thrilled to bring this level of care to new moms, dads, and their babies who depend on us.”

**By Brock Weir**