



Happy 50th Birthday!



The Hirair and Anna  
Hovnanian Foundation  
Neonatal Intensive Care Unit



Opened in 1968, this NICU was the first of its kind in New Jersey and among the first six offered at community hospitals nationally. Today, it is known as the Hirair and Anna Hovnanian Foundation Regional Newborn Center, and it remains among the best rated NICUs nationally, thanks to a combination of the most sophisticated technology and the expertise of a small army of highly trained caregivers.

Monmouth Medical Center's NICU treats more than 500 fragile newborns each year – even those weighing less than a pound and born at just 23 weeks gestation – for conditions such as prematurity, low birth weight, acute life-threatening illnesses and congenital disorders, in addition to performing delicate surgeries. But in the RNC, the focus is on parents as well as babies.

“Parents are often here with their babies for extended periods – four to eight weeks or more,” says Susan Hudome, M.D., chief of neonatology and medical director of the Hirair and Anna Hovnanian Foundation Regional Newborn Center, “so family comfort is a top priority.” This priority is evident through the conversations with parents whose children spent a significant time in the NICU. The one thing that these families always remember is how difficult this time was, but also how positive the experience turned out to be, due to the unit's extraordinary caregivers.

In recognition of the 50th anniversary of Monmouth Medical Center's NICU, we invited parents to reflect on their time in our NICU, and we share those stories on the following pages.

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# The Kennett Family

Over an eight-year period, Michael and Mackenzie Kennett of Freehold discovered the high standards at the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) of the Hirair and Anna Hovnanian Foundation Regional Newborn Center at Monmouth Medical Center firsthand. Each of their four boys needed specialized care there.

The Kennetts' first child, Max, born at 26 weeks, spent four and a half months in the NICU. "He was so tiny that he didn't even look like a baby," says Mackenzie. "He had ruby red skin and was hooked up to so many tubes." Max underwent serious surgeries on his lungs and intestines, with his prognosis changing from day to day.

"Because Max was our first, he was the hardest," says his father, Michael. "But the medical team was amazing. They told us what they would be doing, step by step, before they did it, along with the probable outcomes."

"They called me about the smallest things, just to let me know what was happening," Mackenzie remembers. "They'd sit with me and rub my shoulder and listen to me cry. You could tell that they actually cared about, not just for, our child."

The Kennetts' next son, Colton, now age 4, was born at 36 weeks and wasn't expected to require extra care. But his breathing labored from fluid retention in his lungs following Cesarean birth, and he spent nine days at the NICU while his respiratory problem was stabilized.

Finally, twins Pacey and Calum, born at 34 weeks, had to remain at the center for eight and nine days, respectively, in order to regulate their body temperatures.

Today, all four boys are thriving. Mackenzie and Michael agree that the unit's exceptional caregivers made all the difference.

Given their experience with the center, the Kennetts' bond with the doctors and nurses at the NICU is still going strong, long after the boys were patients. "Having an ailing newborn is an experience I wouldn't wish on anyone, but the quality of care we received at the Center made all the difference to us," Michael says.

"We are so grateful to the NICU staff, and we say thank you every day – when we see our kids' faces – for what they did for our children and what they continue to do every single day," Mackenzie says.

***The Kennett Family of Freehold and members of Monmouth Medical Center's NICU clinical team gather on the field during the August 3 pregame ceremony at an "Amazing Saves" RWJBarnabas Health promotion night at the Lakewood BlueClaws' First Energy Park.***



# The Passarello Family

For Toms River residents Jocelyn and Steve Passarello, MMC's NICU would be their home away from home for 111 days following the birth of their son, Lucas. Born Oct. 5, 2013, at 26 weeks gestation and weighing 2 pounds, 2 ounces, Lucas' care was primarily related to respiratory issues—a common complication in very small babies.

"Lucas' biggest issue was with his airway, and he still has issues with his breathing related to that," says Jocelyn, who notes that he also has something known as soft voice due to scar tissues on his vocal cords. While he wears glasses to correct farsightedness and currently undergoes occupational and physical therapy to improve his fine motor skills, Lucas is a typical, intelligent and inquisitive 4-year-old.

"The NICU staff was very attentive to Lucas, and they had our complete trust," Jocelyn says. "We had such a great experience during the 16 weeks we spent at Monmouth. We are involved each year in the Big Steps for Little Feet fund-raising walk, and have kept in touch with many of the nurses, some of whom have babysat for Lucas."

Jocelyn, a social worker with a local community YMCA, and her husband, Steve, a retail manager for a Best Buy store in Princeton, are also parents to Mack, 1, who was born full term at 8 pounds, 8 ounces.

"After Lucas was born, I learned that I had a uterine septum, which is a congenital defect in the wall of my uterus that didn't allow enough room for him to fully grow, and I had surgery to correct it," she says.

*Steve and Jocelyn Passarello with sons Mack and Lucas*





# The Russotto Family

Morganville residents Christina and John Russottos' NICU journey began the same date as the Passarellos', when their twin sons Johnny and Michael were born Oct. 5, 2013, at 25 weeks gestation, weighing 1 pound, 14 ounces, and 1 pound, 12 ounces, respectively.

While Christina's pregnancy had progressed normally, she said that on a routine well visit on Oct. 4, her doctor discovered that she was in labor, and she was admitted to MMC, where she underwent an emergency C-section the next day.

While Johnny's stay in the NICU lasted nearly four months, his twin, Michael, was transferred at 2 months to an out-of-state hospital for eye surgery, from which he never awoke. In the family's home, framed photos of the tiny preemies adorn the Russottos' family room wall, and Johnny, a tall, smart and active preschooler, proudly points to pictures of his brother. Additionally, Christina, a teacher, and her husband, John Sr., who works in Information Technology, have a 2-year-old daughter, Giovanna, who was born at full term.

"I consider Monmouth Medical Center my home, and the NICU staff to be a part of my family," she said, noting that Johnny underwent care typical of a tiny preemie, primarily oxygen and caffeine treatments for his developing lungs. "We spent 107 days – 12 to 14 hours a day – there, and we really saw firsthand that the care is second to none. The care and compassion of the nursing staff is amazing – Johnny's primary care nurse is still involved in our life, and comes to his birthday parties."

Like Jocelyn, Christina is active with the annual Big Steps for Little Feet Walk, and serves on the hospital committee that organizes it each year.

*John and Christina Russotto with son Johnny and daughter Giovanna*



# The Moncada Family

For Old Bridge residents Bernadette and Michael Moncada, the day their daughter Alexandra was born—last summer on July 31 at 31 weeks gestation, weighing 3 pounds, 6 ounces – was the scariest moment of their lives.

“My husband and I did not know what to expect on the journey that was ahead of us,” Bernadette says. “The first time we saw our baby girl, was very, very hard – she was so tiny and was attached to different tubes and a breathing support machine, and it broke our hearts to see her that way. But the experience turned out to be amazing, as the NICU doctors and nurses gave us the strength to get through the hard days and see a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Bernadette’s pregnancy was not considered high risk, and her doctors couldn’t tell her why she delivered Alexandra nearly two months early. She recalls how challenging it was to go home without her baby, but said they would visit the NICU every day and read and sing to her.

“The NICU staff was phenomenal, and were able to make such a scary and unknown experience so comforting,” she says. “They give so much of themselves each and every day to take excellent care of every baby on the unit; they really go above and beyond to help each family cope with the struggles that can come with having a NICU baby.”

Bernadette, a school counselor at Perth Amboy High School, and her husband, Michael, a staff member with the Union County Department of Public Works, recall how the nurses would nurture Alexandra when they couldn’t be there.

“They were like our angels watching over her for us,” she said. “My husband and I will be forever grateful to them; I believe that our daughter thrived there because of each and every nurse and doctor that took care of her.”

***Michael and Bernadette Moncada with daughter Alexandra***



## The Curley Family

Charlotte Curley was born on July 24, 2015, after her mom, Jennifer Curley, went into premature labor following what had been an uneventful pregnancy.

When she arrived at Monmouth Medical Center the day prior, doctors told her she would not be leaving the hospital until her baby was born, and that they were going to do everything possible to keep her labor from progressing. That night, Monmouth Medical Center neonatologist, Dr. Diane Attardi, came to her room to talk to her and her husband about what would happen when their baby was born and what to expect in the NICU.

"I was monitored throughout the night and it seemed like the medications were working and my labor was not progressing anymore, but in the morning, things progressed quickly and at 9:49 a.m. our daughter was born," Jennifer said. "Charlotte Anne Curley arrived just 25 weeks and two days into my pregnancy, weighing only 1 pound 10 ounces and 12 3/4 inches long. But she came out crying, and her Apgar scores (a method to quickly summarize the health of newborns against infant mortality) were 9 and 9 on a scale of 1 to 10, which we were told was amazing."

*Michael and Jennifer Curley with Charlotte.*

Jennifer was able to hold her newborn daughter on her chest for a moment before she was tended to by the NICU team. "At 17 minutes old she stopped breathing and compressions were done for three minutes," she said. "I was taken down to the NICU a little later in the day and I can still remember seeing my tiny baby for the first time – she was so fragile and so small."

Charlotte spent one day on the ventilator and then was switched to CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure for treatment of apnea), which she remained on until she was slowly weaned off on September 16. While in the NICU, she had three blood transfusions, spent some time under the bilirubin light and underwent multiple diagnostic procedures and eye checks. She was diagnosed with a heart murmur, which resolved itself, and endured a lot of apnea episodes, which she outgrew. A few additional cardiac issues also resolved themselves, and while she remains under the care of a cardiologist for a diagnosis of pulmonary valve stenosis, the condition is not currently affecting her.

After 74 days, Charlotte was discharged on October 6 at age 35 weeks and 6 days, exactly one month prior to Jennifer's original due date and weighing 4 pounds, 13 ounces.

"Although it was a scary time for us, and some days it felt like it would never get better and never end, we feel blessed that during our time in the NICU, we were in such a caring, loving environment," Jennifer says. "The care our daughter received was top notch and I could not have imagined being anyplace else. The doctors were amazing – they explained everything, every step of the way, so we could understand the care being given, and they encouraged us to be involved."

"The nurses were wonderful, and let us be as hands on as we could," adds Jennifer, who notes that her family relocated last summer to Virginia Beach, but still travels to New Jersey each September for the Big Steps Walk. "The friendships that we have made with some of the staff will last forever. If it was not for them and their love of what they do, our Charlotte would not be the happy, healthy, smart, beautiful 3 year old she is today."



# The Farrell Family

Twins Teagan and Kalynn were born December 27, 2017, at 33 weeks gestation to parents Amanda and Kara Farrell of Long Branch, following a serious complication in Amanda's pregnancy associated with preterm labor, known as velamentous cord insertion.

A pregnancy complication in which the umbilical cord is abnormally inserted into the placenta, velamentous cord insertion can lead to serious pregnancy complications, particularly in the case of multiple births.

Kara explains that Kaylnn was the baby on top in Amanda's uterus, and if she would have dropped down, the result would have been catastrophic. "If Kalynn had dropped, it would have possibly ruptured the umbilical cord," Amanda adds.

The Farrells were unprepared for the world they were about to experience in the NICU, as their older daughter, 2-year-old McKenna, was born at 37 weeks following an uneventful pregnancy and weighed 6 pounds 3 ounces.

"We knew nothing about the NICU – we weren't expecting them to be there," Kara says. "But the doctors were phenomenal – they explained everything and provided a timeline of what would happen when, and we just knew immediately that the girls were safe."

During the twins' two-and-a-half week stay in the NICU, Teagan, born at 4 pounds, 9 ounces, and Kalynn, who weighed 3 pounds, 10 ounces, spent some time under the bilirubin light and Teagan underwent six hours of CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) treatment for apnea. Kara notes that she and Amanda felt like the twins' neonatologists treated the babies like they were a part of their own families and that they formed incredible bonds with their nurses.

"For me the most emotional part of our time in the NICU was when the nurses helped Amanda hold the babies for the first time," Kara said. "And then when the twins were being discharged, one of their nurses personally made outfits for them with purple tutus and onesies that read 'Peace out NICU'."

*Kara, left, and Amanda Farrell, with twins Kalynn, right, and Teagan and their big sister McKenna.*





# The Barone Family

In reaching out to Monmouth Medical Center to share her NICU story, Eatontown resident Cathy Barone noted that she has her two sons today because of the care they received at Monmouth Medical Center more than three decades ago.

"I have two sons that both had positive experiences in the NICU — my son Joey is 35 years old and was born at 28 weeks, and my other son Andy, now 31, was born at 30 weeks," she says. "We had wonderful nurses and doctors and I have both of them because of the NICU team."

Cathy, a semi-retired Eatontown school teacher, had lost two pregnancies before the birth of Joey and was under the care of Monmouth Medical Center maternal-fetal medicine physicians who care for women with high risk pregnancies. She was on bed rest for much of her pregnancy with Joey, who was born on February 11, 1983, in the middle of a blizzard.

"Joey weighed 2 pounds, 14 ounces, and spent seven weeks in the NICU," Cathy says, recalling that his Apgar score at birth was just 1 on a scale of 10. "He had cardiac issues, including a heart valve problem that he was given medications for, that at the time were considered experimental, and was on home monitors for his first year."

Andy was born June 2, 1987, weighing 3 pounds 8 ounces, with an Apgar score of 3. He spent six weeks in the NICU, primarily due to respiratory issues. "The care was wonderful in the NICU – the nurses were amazing, and they didn't only take care of my babies, they took care of me too," she says. "On the day I brought Joey home, one of his nurses took the day off and came to my home and spent the day making sure I was comfortable."

Today, Joey and his wife, Alessandra, live in Howell with their 4-month old daughter Cassandra. Andy and his wife Caroline live in Tinton Falls with their 3-month old son Gavin, who like his father, began his life in Monmouth Medical Center's NICU. Gavin was born at 33 weeks and spent 17 days in the NICU, with a feeding tube for 15 days to help him gain weight and CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) treatment for apnea.

"My husband, Pat, and I will be forever grateful to all of the NICU team members for their skills and dedication and the love they gave to all three Barone boys," Cathy says.

Cathy also has a daughter Camille, now 38, who was born full term. She is the mother of 11-year-old Carlie, and 7-year-old Casey.

***The Barone family from left, Andy and his son Gavin, Joey, and Cathy.***



# The Tackett Family

Over the course of 50 years, many parents have had children who were born prematurely and have grown to live healthy lives because of the care they received in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Monmouth Medical Center. Pearl Tackett of Rumson is one of those parents.

Pearl's daughter, Veronica, was born three months early and weighed only about 1.5 pounds. She recalls the months her daughter, now 29 years old, spent in MMC's NICU and how the doctors and nurses worked diligently to help her daughter grow and eventually, go home.

"Everyone at the NICU made me feel as comfortable as possible during what was a very difficult time," said Pearl, a medical assistant for an eye center in Red Bank. "The team always kept me updated on Veronica's care, and they allowed my other daughter, Gabrielle, who was just 1 at the time, to visit her sister.

"They are very hands on," she adds. "I still have video of the nurses helping me give Veronica her first bath."

Today, Veronica lives a healthy and happy life as a sales manager for Anthropology in White Plains New York, which her mother attributes to the care her daughter received at MMC's NICU.

"They were wonderful, kind and considerate – a great team of people," she said.

**Veronica Tackett**



# The Durnien Family

It might be difficult to find someone who celebrated the 50th anniversary of MMC's milestone more than 14-year-old Brian Durnien and his family.

Brian was due to be born in August 2004 "but he had other plans," says his mother, Lori, a preschool teacher and Long Branch resident. She and her husband, Paul, a building code enforcer, already had two sons (Matthew, now 19, and Christopher, now 17) when in April of that year, Lori felt ill and drove herself to the hospital.

Little did she know at the time that she was, in fact, in full labor. She still has the parking ticket from that day, which shows she pulled her car into the lot at 7:14 a.m. Brian was born exactly three hours later just 24 weeks' gestation. He weighed only 1 pound, 13 ounces, and was rushed to the RNC, MMC's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

Brian had multiple health problems—the most significant was a heart valve that hadn't closed, which caused bleeding on his brain. At 4 days old he had his first surgery, to close the valve with a titanium clip. Over 115 days in the hospital, he had numerous transfusions, multiple infections, eating problems and breathing issues. When he finally left the hospital, Brian weighed 7 pounds and was still on oxygen.

But his family brought him back a few months later, when Brian developed swelling in the brain and needed emergency surgery to put a shunt in to drain the fluid.

At every step of the journey, the doctors and nurses were nothing but supportive, Lori recalls. "They always encouraged us," she says. "They never gave up on him no matter what happened. It was the most terrifying time of my life, but those nurses kept our entire family going, including his two older brothers. Every Sunday was big brother day, and they were ready. If Brian had a bad day, they never let it get us down. They were always positive."

Brian had more health problems over the years and developed cerebral palsy as a result of the bleeding on his brain. But today he is a freshman at Red Bank Catholic High School. "His physical limitations aggravate him," his mom admits. But he's also stubborn and willing to try anything, she adds. "The nurses and doctors at Monmouth said, 'Whatever you expect from him he will do. If you work with him he will do it.'"

They were right, she says. And she thanks them for that, and more. "Everything they did was done because they loved him so much and treated him like their own," Lori says. "They were his mothers when I couldn't be there."

Throughout its five decades, one thing has remained constant, despite the advances in technology and medical care, the NICU has retained its family-centered focus, treating parents and family members with compassion and respect. We thank these families for sharing their stories about the role Monmouth Medical Center's NICU played in their happily ever afters.

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