Meet some of our NICUSTRONG teams from last year:

**Top Fundraising Team – Alba-Nieces.**

Sister-in-laws Julie Sinclair Albanese and Samantha Lanzo Albanese started their team, “Alba-Nieces” to thank the NICU for the great care their baby girls (Ella and Presley) received. Julie’s daughter Ella was born in December of 2017 and had to go to the NICU for an infection. Julie developed a strong bond with the doctors, nurses and other families. A little over 6 months later, Samantha delivered her baby girl, Presley. Once again, this family experienced the amazing NICU care, as Presley had fluid in her lungs. Like Ella, Presley received unmatched love, support, and assistance during her stay. The girls’ ailments thankfully did not last beyond their stay, but the memories of their time spent in the NICU stay with them. In the effort to help other NICU families have the same positive experience, Julie, Samantha, their husbands and families worked to raise nearly $21,000 and attended the walk with their fabulous personalized team t-shirts!

**Top Individual Fundraiser – Giselle Mongiello (husband Joe Mongiello); team ItsanMandMLife.**

Their twin girls, Mia and Mikayla were born on July 26, 2015, 12 weeks premature. Mikayla weighed 2lbs 6 oz and Mia weighed 1lb 15 oz. They were immediately intubated and began their 70 (Mikayla) and 78 (Mia) day stays. Their girls had numerous issues (breathing issues, feeding issues, hernia surgeries), along with many other common daily obstacles. Through the journey, Joe and Giselle stayed strong, mostly thanks to the staff in the NICU. “We owe them so much and are extremely grateful for saving our little miracles, Mia and Mikayla” – Giselle.
We would love to hear from you and have you join us this year at the 2nd Annual NICUSTRONG Walk on September 15, 2019. Visit hackensackumcfoundation.org/nicustrongwalk2019 to get started, or reach out to Lauren Coticchio Willis at lauren.willis@hackensackmeridian.org or 551-996-3573. We hope to see you there!

NICUSTRONG teams, continued from cover

In the fall of 2016, Joe and Giselle had contact with one of the Neonatologists who asked if they would be interested in being part of a family council for the NICU to help other families. They now lead the family advisory council and came up with the idea of the walk last year. They are eager to help continue to grow this event by reaching more families, raising more money and help show how everyone is NICUSTRONG.

Oldest Patient – Aidan, now age 18.

Aidan was born on June 24, 2001 at 1lb 8.5oz, a 24-weeker. His original due date was October 5, and he wound up being in the NICU 117 days, going home on October 19. Like so many NICU babies, his story started with pre-term labor and an emergency delivery to save mom (Sharles) and hopefully, baby too. Aidan was resuscitated at birth, and then went to the NICU. Sharles did not see Aidan for 24 hours after delivery because she was also fighting for her life. Through this scary journey, the one thing that kept Sharles calm and gave her strength was the support and care of the NICU team. She was treated like family by the staff nurses – “Little did I know that these wonderful angels would become my NICU family for life!” shares Sharles, reflecting back. Without the NICU staff, innovative treatment and care Aidan received, she does not believe they would now have Aidan at 18, happy and healthy. This proud mom and her son helped raise over $1,500 in support of the first walk, and cannot wait to come back again this year!

One of the youngest patients at the walk – baby Mia, now 1 as of May 2019

Mom knew from the moment Mia was born, she was a fighter and the epitome of NICUSTRONG. Mia surprised the doctors, nurses, and everyone with her feistiness right from the beginning. When she was born, Mia was put on CPAP at 21, then moved onto the mask, two days later onto high flow. Thankfully, every change was a move in a positive direction, getting stronger and bigger each day. Mia’s parents are so grateful to the doctors and nurses who watched, cared for and loved their little girl! Without the amazing team in this NICU, this story and so many others could have been very different. They were able to come to the walk, with Mia discharged a few weeks before and they raised almost $2,500. It was Mia’s first post-NICU outing and so special for everyone to see her there! 😊

What is your story?

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On February 22, 2017, my husband Michael and I were headed to my doctor’s office for my 31-week check-up. It was my 40th birthday. I was feeling good and I was excited to go out to dinner to celebrate. We would have never known this day would change our lives forever.

During my exam, my doctor was concerned that my blood pressure was high, and my hands and face were swollen. He said I have symptoms of preeclampsia, and he needed to do a blood test. At this point, I had a planned C-section scheduled for April 18. My doctor informed us that he might have to deliver our baby girl earlier than planned. At that moment it felt like our world came crashing down.

At 9:30 a.m. on February 23, my doctor called to confirm I had preeclampsia, and that I had to go to the hospital as soon as possible. As I cried hysterically, I quickly got dressed, and my husband and I headed to the hospital. Once we checked in, all of the testing began. The testing went on every hour into the next day. On February 24, I was told I needed an MRI to check my placenta. When my doctor entered the room with the results, I could already tell the results were not good. He explained my placenta was deteriorating due to the preeclampsia, and my C-section was scheduled for 9:30 a.m. the next morning. It was at that moment that fear and panic took over my body, as I have never experienced before.

On the morning of February 25, I was being prepped for surgery. I have never felt so terrified and so excited at the same time. We would finally get to meet our baby girl today! The surgery was going as planned. At 9:47 a.m. we heard the doctor say, “Welcome to the world, beautiful baby girl!”, and we heard her cry! We both just sobbed. We were overcome with this indescribable feeling of love, and could not believe she came out crying! We did not know what to expect, but once we heard her cry, we knew we had a feisty little girl on our hands. They brought her over to us and I kissed her beautiful little face for the first time. They quickly took her away to the NICU. We named her Violet Grace. She weighed 2 lbs. 14 oz. and was 15 inches long.

After a long recovery, I was able to get wheeled down to the NICU that evening. I pushed myself to stand up next to the isolette to hold Violet’s hand. Her hat and CPAP machine mostly covered her face. There were so many wires and tubes; it was hard to see past them. I could not help but to cry seeing her like that, and not being able to hold her. We prayed that the sound of our voices and the touch of our hands were enough to ease any pain or discomfort she had.

The next seven days were extremely difficult. My condition worsened as my blood pressure continued to rise. I was not allowed to leave my hospital bed. And of course that meant I was not allowed to leave my room to see Violet. I could not handle being separated from her. My husband would go back and forth to the NICU, to be by her side. He would take pictures and videos for me so I can see that she was ok. I would call down to the NICU almost every half hour to get updates. She was doing really well, and we were so grateful.

Once my blood pressure was regulated by medication, I was finally able to get discharged. For the next 3 weeks, we were amazed how quickly Violet progressed. We could not believe how strong she was! The nurses were amazing, and some of them called her their “little rock star!” After a week, she was off the CPAP machine and was moving down the hall. After a week and a half, I was finally able to do kangaroo care. The nurses would put her inside of my shirt, and she would sleep on my chest for hours. It was the most amazing feeling! Her weight increased consistently, and she was feeding very well from the bottle. Before we knew it, she was ready for the car seat test, and she passed. After just 30 days, our sweet girl was ready to come home!

I can remember those long days in the NICU dreaming about the day she would be running around the house calling “Mommy” and “Daddy!” I still cannot believe that day is today! Violet is now a beautiful, super strong, independent, funny two-year-old, who has changed our lives in the most amazing way possible. This little angel fills our home with laughter and our hearts with so much love. She will forever be our inspiration! 💫
Dear Parents, Family, and Friends:

My name is Joe Mongiello and I have been where you are, and where you are about to go. My wife, Giselle, and I are the proud parents of identical twin girls Mikayla and Mia whom were born 12 weeks premature and spent 10 and 11 weeks respectively, in the NICU. One day we may meet, and I can tell you our story; but for now, I wanted to introduce myself and let you know there is a group of NICU graduate parents that are here for you should you want to talk. We aren’t doctors, nurses, or caregivers. We are a group of parents that understand what it is like to have a baby in the NICU. Sometimes even our closest family and friends cannot offer the support like someone who has walked this path. We don’t have all the answers, but we can offer our time and a listening ear.

Should you ever want to talk please speak to the social worker, charge nurse, or your baby’s nurse. I can also be reached directly by email or phone and I will set up a time for one of the members of the Family Advisory Council to reach out to you.

Warm regards,
Joseph Mongiello
NICU Family Resource Specialist
551-996-2000, ext. 71826
joseph.mongiello@hackensackmeridian.org

The NICU Family Advisory Council is currently recruiting volunteers. If you would like to contribute, an information card can be filled out at the greeter’s desk.

Upcoming NICU classes, continued from cover

Hackensack University Medical Center
30 Prospect Avenue, Hackensack, NJ 07601

- Breastfeeding Class:
  Learn the basics of breastfeeding
  September 8 & 29, 9:30 a.m.– 11:30 a.m.

- Sibling Class:
  Designed for young children, ages 3 to 7, to help prepare them for a new baby in the family.
  September 8, 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

- Happiest Baby on the Block: Teaches the expectant parents how to soothe a fussy infant and help their babies sleep longer.
  September 23, 7:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m.

Contributors

The NICU Family to Family Newsletter is produced by the NICU Family Advisory Council of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit - Joseph M. Sanzari Children’s Hospital at Hackensack University Medical Center. We welcome your suggestions and comments. Please contact Joseph Mongiello, NICU Family Resource Specialist, 551-996-2000, ext. 71826

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