





Threads of Love

The baby weighed less than 3 pounds. Tubes wound their way into his mouth, his nose. An IV needle pierced the fragile skin on his little leg. Wires encased in plastic sheathing snaked from his little body to monitors outside his isolette. Tiny patches covered his eyes. His body spasmed fitfully. He seemed exhausted and agitated all in the same instant; he appeared to be in pain. His telemetry was off the charts.

Slowly, his mother took the lovie doll she had held next to her chest between her breasts and her hospital gown and gave it to the nurse. Gently, the woman placed it in the baby's isolette, snuggling it carefully against the child's frail body. He quieted immediately. Several of the monitoring devices around him fell back to normal, and he slept.

Jackie McPeeters tells that story over and over to anyone who will listen. "It was my first experience seeing how it really helped," she said. "It" was a doll made of little more than a piece of flannel fashioned



Top: A small preemie sleeps quietly, a love doll draped over her. The doll carries her mother's scent and provides comfort to the infant.

Above left: Jackie McPheeters makes lovie dolls with help from the Boy Scouts at the annual Hearts & Hands Service Day sponsored by the Newport-Mesa_Irvine Interfaith Council. The local Threads of Love chapter had four tables, and volunteers from throughout the community stopped by to lend a hand.

Above right: Members of Mesa Verde United Methodist Church have been making lovie dolls, burial gowns, tiny vests, and isolette covers for several years. They stopped by on the service day to help Jackie teach others how to make the dolls.

with a cloth head and a hat. The fact that the doll soothed the child is known as scent bonding. While the science that surrounds it is still not clear, doctors are learning that a mother's scent is of great importance to an infant. When it comes to premature babies who begin life separated from their mothers, the scent helps to settle them while still in the hospital and makes the transition easier when the child goes home. And this says nothing for how it helps the mother.

Jackie runs the Orange County chapter of Threads of Love, a non-profit organization whose volunteers make items of clothing, blankets, and other articles for premature babies. They also make the lovie dolls. There are tiny crocheted or knitted caps, small vests, little flannel baby blankets, isolette covers, and the dolls, all of which are given to hospitals for use in their NICUs (Newborn Intensive Care Units).



Above: Small flannel blankets are placed over a baby's isolette to help reduce the light to which preemies seem to be hypersensitive. At Mesa Verde UMC, these coverlettes are made by the dozen, especially during church work days and Vacation Bible School.



Top: Threads of Love makes tiny vests with velcro “snaps” that do not impede the medical staff. In the sterile environment, a vest helps humanize the situation.

Immediately above: For premature infants who do not survive, Threads of Love makes burial gowns.

The cap keeps the baby’s head warm and often helps to hold in place things like IV lines. The vest and blanket are more for the parents; it’s a little personal touch. The larger blanket is used to partially cover the isolette; preemies, who seem to be hypersensitive to light and noise, are more comfortable when their surroundings are quiet and the light is low. Later, as the infant grows and can spend some time outside the isolette, the blanket can be used to wrap

him or her in and can function as a receiving blanket when he or she goes home.

The lovie doll, on the other hand, is given initially to the mother, who sleeps with it, often lactating on it. In this way she transfers her scent to the doll. The doll is then placed in the isolette, where it helps soothe the baby.

Premature babies spend the first days, weeks, and sometimes even months living in the cocoon of their isolettes, where doctors and nurses use every technique and technology at their disposal to keep them alive. Tiny preemies can weigh as little as a pound and can be held in the palm of your hand. Often their organs, including their brains, are not yet fully developed.

These tiny creatures face a barrage of life-threatening problems that can include severe breathing difficulties, anemia, infection, brain damage, blindness, low blood pressure, blood sugar imbalance, jaundice, trouble maintaining a steady temperature, and difficulty coordinating sucking and swallowing. Attached to a surfeit of machines via a plethora of tubes and wires and kept in warm isolettes, they begin their journey in life just struggling to survive.

Jackie divides her time between fundraising, providing materials to groups who do the sewing, knitting, and crocheting, and delivering the final products to local hospitals. Each Black Friday, she organizes volunteers to help her buy flannel. Last year she bought between 3,000 and 4,000 yards of the material, and it wasn’t enough. She estimates that she has delivered somewhere in the neighborhood of 14,000

items this year. Hospitals that have requested them include Anaheim Memorial Medical Center, Childrens Hospital of Orange County, Kaiser Permanente Hospital South County and La Palma, Long Beach Memorial Medical Center, Presbyterian Intercommunity Hospital, Riverview Hospital, Saddleback Memorial Medical Center, St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, Tri City Medical Center, Western Medical Center, and UCI Medical Center.

Technically, a premature infant is a baby born more than three weeks early. Statistics vary, depending on the source. According to the website Preemie-Survival.org, babies born at 23 weeks have a 17% chance of survival. At 24 weeks, the number is 39%; at 25 weeks, it is 50/50.

It used to be that an infant who was miscarried, stillborn, or who died shortly after birth was placed in a paper wrapper and sent to the morgue almost immediately. But medical professionals have begun to realize the importance of letting a mother see and hold her child, even if he or she has not survived. In 1993, a pediatrician from Earl K. Long Charity Hospital asked the women of the First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, if they could provide some sort of clothing for these tiny infants. Initially, then, Threads of Love made burial gowns for premature babies.

That first group of women ended up modifying Cabbage Patch doll patterns, as patterns for healthy newborns were much too big. Threads of Love still makes burial items, including caps and bonnets, gowns, booties, and blankets. The gowns are made to fit over the baby as the skin of many

tiny preemies is too fragile to touch. The mother is then given the opportunity to say good bye to her child, a tiny baby, fully clothed and nestled in a flannel blanket. It is a much more humanizing way to help her through the grief process.

Today Threads of Love chapters can be found in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, the U.K., Germany, Australia, and Africa. The organization now also serves babies who are not necessarily preemies but are critically ill and face extended time in isolette units.

Jackie McPheeters has been running the Orange County chapter for 14 years and, as she put it, she's not getting any younger. Although Ann Katapski now coordinates the South Orange County chapter, Jackie is looking for someone to mentor. If you are interested, Jackie can be reached at toljackie@sbcglobal.net. For more information about Threads of Love, go to threadsoflove.org.

