



4 MONTHS EARLY

Two moms tell their stories about their micro-premature babies

BY AMY STUBBLEFIELD

You might say all babies are “little miracles,” but some have a more incredible start than others.

Kendra Hollie’s daughter, Annalise, certainly qualifies as a miracle. Born on October 14, 2013, at 23 weeks gestation, Annalise weighed just 13 ounces — not even one pound — at birth. She was only 10 inches long.

Hollie’s birth story began a few days earlier, when she started to have some cramping during her pregnancy — not debilitating, but painful enough to cause concern.

When she headed to the hospital, doctors said her blood pressure was high and heart rate was low. But after listening to the baby’s heartbeat and judging everything fine, her doctor sent her home with just some blood pressure medication.

A day later, Hollie ended up back in the emergency room with bad headaches and chest pain.

“It was discovered by ultra-sound that my fluid was low and Annalise was showing signs of stress, and not growing,” she recalls.

Hollie was immediately moved to the Mother Baby Center at Abbott Northwestern Hospital and put on bed rest.

No more than a few hours passed before she was in labor.

“I never thought in my life I would deliver a micro-premature baby,” Hollie says. “I was heartbroken.”

She credits her boyfriend Calvin, friends, family, and the doctors and nurses for being her support team.

“I would tell other mothers, don’t blame yourself,” she says. “It does get stressful, especially on your relationship and family, but step back and breathe, talk about what you’re going through. It helps a lot to cry, laugh and work.”

Now, Annalise is four months old and growing every day. In February she weighed 6 pounds, 14 ounces and had begun to breathe on her own. After reaching one

more milestone — bottling — she’ll be able to go home and join her mom, dad, and big brother, 6-year-old Orlando.

“Life is different, our weekend is at the hospital,” Hollie says. “But I feel like Annalise is going to grow up just fine and healthy, like any normal child. She’s always been a feisty little thing from the time she was born.”

A DOUBLE MIRACLE

The fear and sadness that come with having a dangerously premature baby is nothing a parent should ever have to experience — especially not twice.

But Nicole Penwarden of Burnsville knows all too well what that feeling is like. She’s mom to not one, but two miracle babies, both of whom faced tremendous challenges at birth due to their premature deliveries.

Penwarden first went through the experience when her son Sebastian was born at 34 weeks — six weeks early — in August of 2011.

Like many women who go into premature labor, she saw no early signs or symptoms that might have indicated trouble.

"I had your picture-perfect pregnancy," she recalls.

But when she started experiencing unusual back pain, she had a feeling something was amiss. Despite talking to her doctor, who found nothing wrong, her water broke three days later—six weeks before her due date.

"With my first son, I had no idea what the NICU [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit] even was. It's overwhelming to see your baby for a couple of minutes, then they're gone," she says. "You have nurses and doctors explaining that he won't come home with you until his due date, that they have milestones they have to meet, like being able to breathe on their own."

She and her husband went home from the hospital without their baby, who stayed in the NICU for three weeks after birth.

That's when Penwarden started to search for resources and ways to cope, seeking advice from other moms in similar situations. She found blogs to read and connected with other women through Facebook groups, which helped her to traverse a complicated medical journey.

"Sometimes when you ask the doctors questions, they say, 'It's just a common preemie issue,'" she recalls. "It helped having people that have been through that and can put it in terms you're going to understand and not be overwhelmed with."

She encourages moms going through the same thing to "talk to doctors, really push them to keep you in the loop."

It wasn't something the couple ever wanted to experience again—yet just one year later, in August 2012, that's exactly what happened.

During her second pregnancy, Penwarden was treated with progesterin, a typical procedure for women who have had a previous premature birth. But at 25 weeks along, her doctor placed her on bed rest to prepare for another potentially premature baby.

"The longer I could make bed rest, the better," she explains. "When you're talking 24, 25, 26 weeks, each day means so much more."

Just one week later, her second son, Sam, was born at 26 weeks and three days. He weighed 2 pounds and 12 ounces—

more than the average 1 pound, 6 ounces for a baby at his gestational stage. A baby like Sam, born at 26 weeks or earlier, is referred to as a "micro preemie"—a dangerously premature baby. Those born at Sam's gestational stage have a roughly 70 percent survival rate.

After such a high-risk delivery, Penwarden spent no more than 30 seconds with her baby before he was whisked away to the NICU to have his breathing monitored.

He spent the next 97 days there, before the family finally brought their second miracle baby home in November.

"So many think medical issues stop and everything gets back to normal after you leave the NICU," she says. "But that is rarely the case. You have many doctor's appointments and therapies, namely when you have a micro preemie like Sam."

Sam completes physical therapy once a week, occupational therapy once a week, and also receives intervention therapy through the school district once a week to help him reach developmental milestones.

He was also diagnosed with seizures caused by an abnormal section in the left frontal lobe of his brain. "He suffers from low tone and seizures along with development delays mostly in his motor skill area," Penwarden explains. "The doctors are not sure why he has these delays, so we are starting genetic testing at the University of Minnesota."

Though the day-to-day challenges continue for the family, Penwarden makes a point of sharing her story for the online community that has been such an asset to her since the beginning. She started a blog for each of her sons—"The Life and Times of Ziggy" and "The Life and Times of Baby P, The Sequel."

There, she continues to share their experiences with ongoing physical therapy and development.

In the midst of her regular blog updates about day-to-day challenges with two preemies, Penwarden makes a point of writing letters to her children, chronicling their growth and celebrating every added milestone and miracle in their lives. ■■■

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