

Sewing to soothe

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A local volunteer group is reaching out to hospitals and families of premature babies with clothing and other items designed specifically for the smallest of infants.

Jennifer Patin, vice-president of Heartstrings & Angel Wings, began the group with her family in late 2008 after the premature birth of her nephew, Heath Logan. Born 16 weeks early, little Heath weighed less than two pounds, making it nearly impossible to find proper clothing.

Patin said the family was able to purchase some clothes online, but at a cost of about \$100 for three or four outfits. They then tried the Build-A-Bear Workshop store in the Mall of Acadiana, but found those clothes to usually be too wide for the baby.

The idea to start a local sewing group to make clothes for premature babies came from a local seamstress, Patin said. The idea hit closer to home when Patin's own daughter, Amelia, was born seven weeks premature.

"It's an emergency situation, so there's no time to find these kinds of clothes or items," Patin said. "It helped as a **parent** because this is the only thing I could control. You can't control the medicine or when or how they are fed, but when we had bath time and I could dress her, that was the highlight of my day."

The group now makes shirts, blankets, laundry bags, bumper pads for babies to lay on, cloth snakes to surround the babies and isolette covers, which are placed on top of a neonatal intensive care unit bed so that the area remains dark and quiet. So far, they have worked with and donated items to Lafayette General Medical Center, Women's & Children's Hospital and Woman's Hospital in Baton Rouge.

Those items help create a more womb-like environment for babies, said Darlene LeBlanc, a registered nurse at Lafayette General Medical Center who has worked extensively with the group. When babies are more comfortable, their small bodies are less stressed, which can help keep their vital signs

more stable and aid in their mental development.

"The baby will always look for a boundary, which is why these snakes and bumper pads are so helpful," LeBlanc said. "Before we had these, sometimes we would find the babies curled up at the end of the isolette because they needed something to lean up against."

The group has worked together with nurses to make sure the items are appropriate and work as intended. The most popular clothing items are diaper shirts, which are made with Velcro and allow nurses to adjust the clothing as needed without having to remove IVs or other tubes that the baby needs.

"It made my day just to see them dressed in some beautiful little clothes and have their blankets around them," said Ashley Fontenot, whose twins, Brienne Marie and Tristen Michael, were born on Jan. 28 and are in Lafayette General's NICU.

"The blankets that cover the units keep it dark and quiet and keep the light away from their eyes. It helps them sleep better," Fontenot said. "As far as the blankets and the clothes, I don't know if it aids them, but it makes us feel better because there's something cute in the bed with them. They look just like a baby you have at home. It's so much nicer than seeing them on a white hospital blanket."

To continue their efforts, Heartstrings & Angel Wings will hold a gumbo cookoff at Crawfish Town

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