



# Paying it Forward

**WHEN TRAVIS ARLEDGE WAS BORN, HE WEIGHED JUST 1 LB., 3.5 OZ. ONE PERSON GAVE HIS FRIGHTENED PARENTS HOPE: NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT NURSE JOANN THORPE OF MERCY MEDICAL CENTER REDDING, AND WINNER OF THIS YEAR'S NATIONAL NICU HEROES AWARD.**



A wave of paralyzing fear washed over Chelsea Arledge in July 2008. It was a beautiful day in Redding, sunny and warm, but this first-time mother was in labor. When her water broke at 20 weeks, doctors told her the baby couldn't survive; he needed more time. It was just three weeks and two days later that she went into labor.

And her baby wasn't due until November.

In pain and frightened, convinced she was going to lose her baby, Chelsea felt helpless, and hopeless. That's when Joann Thorpe, a Neonatal Intensive Care nurse, came into the delivery room and took her hand.

"We're going to do everything we can to save your baby," Thorpe said.

"She was the first person to say that," Chelsea says now, "and I immediately trusted her."

Travis was born weighing just 1 pound, 3.5 ounces. At just over 23 weeks, his lungs weren't developed. The newborn would need to be on a ventilator for the first two months of his life. For eight days, he lived in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Mercy Medical Center Redding, often attended to by Thorpe.

"Travis was on the edge of viability," Thorpe explains. "But he fought for life from the moment he was born."

She also watched over Chelsea and her husband Joseph, who was serving in Iraq at the time and had been granted emergency leave. Thorpe knew they all had a long road ahead. When a baby is born prematurely, it can tear a family apart. The fear and stress of watching a child struggle with every breath is overwhelming. There are medical decisions to make, medical jargon to decipher.

"People need to know what's ahead, what the baby will go through," says Thorpe. "They also need to know that there's hope, especially when dealing with the greatest crisis of their lives."

She encouraged Chelsea and Joseph to take pictures of Travis, to document his life and his progress. At one point, Joseph's wedding ring fit all the way up Travis' tiny arm. It was 44 days before they could hold him, and by then he had been transferred to a highly-specialized NICU that could help his lungs develop more. But it

was Joann Thorpe who helped teach them how to change Travis' diaper, who helped them survive.

Joann Thorpe became a neonatal nurse 27 years ago, not long after her youngest daughter, Jodie, was born suffering from respiratory distress, requiring a stay in the NICU. She remembers the terror and uncertainty; she knows well how hard it can be to understand the medical terminology. A nurse helped her to understand, and she paid it forward.

She's now a grandmother, and admits to thinking about retiring. But she can't imagine not caring for babies, and not being an advocate for the parents.

"Every day when I go to the hospital, there's another family, another crisis. Another baby to help. That's why I do what I do," she says.

It's also why Joann Thorpe is a natural recipient of the 3rd Annual NICU Heroes Award, sponsored by Hand to Hold, a national NICU parent support organization, and Mead Johnson Nutrition Company, a leader in pediatric nutrition. Joann elected to have her \$2500 award go to Mercy Foundation North to purchase rocker devices that can help soothe drug-exposed infants in Mercy Medical Center Redding's NICU.

"I am so unbelievably honored to be recognized," she says. "Helping babies and their families, becoming part of their lives forever, is truly the best reward."

Thorpe's daughter Jodie (she also has an older daughter, Shannon) is now 31 with a daughter of her own, Reagann, who recently turned four. Chelsea, Joseph, Travis, and Travis' little sister Ava, were all at the birthday party. When Travis was finally released from the hospital, he weighed 7 pounds, 4 ounces. Today, he's 7 years old and just started first grade. Though still small for his age, and a bit of a finicky eater, he's healthy.

And Chelsea Arledge is paying the hope forward, studying to be a neonatal nurse. She wants to provide other frightened parents with the support and love – the hope – she first received one day in July of 2008 from a nurse named Joann Thorpe.

*We'll do  
everything  
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baby*

