

Grieving Melbourne mom starts nonprofit to help other parents

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The Baby Matthew Bear sits on top of an unused changing table at the Harden's house in Melbourne.

As stuffed bears go, it is a pretty standard one, bought from a Build-a-Bear store.

But when a hidden button on the bear's chest is pressed, out comes the beating heart of a fetus, the kind of amplified sound a pregnant woman might hear during a visit to a doctor's office.

Some parents liken it to the rhythmic sound of a freight train, others to a horse in full gallop. For women, the muffled rat-a-tat sound of the beating heart is a joyous moment on the road to motherhood.

Not so for Jennifer Harden.

Her son, Matthew, only lived for 31/2 hours after he was born at Holmes Regional Medical Center in March 2009.

Harden, decided to carry him to term despite knowing when 16 weeks pregnant that her unborn son had a condition called PUV (Posterior Urethral Valves), which affects the bladders and the kidneys, preventing the baby from urinating. Doctors said her child was unlikely to survive.

"It wasn't his fault," said Harden, 28, who lives with her family in Melbourne.

But once she had made the decision to continue her pregnancy, Harden found coping difficult.

"You have to turn to someone," she said.

As a result of her experience, Harden started a nonprofit called Cherishing the Journey, a group that will offer comfort and guidance to mothers in similar situation.

Financial help

According to the 2011 National Vital Statistics Report, the mortality rate for infants less than 28 days was 4.19 per 1,000 live births in the United States.

Harden's charity would provide financial assistance for funerals and give memory boxes to parents to preserve trinkets and mementos of their child.

On Oct. 15, which is National Infant Loss and Awareness Day, the group will have its first fundraiser at Wickham Park with a memory walk and butterfly release.

"We hope to help mothers and walk them through this process, help them grieve and provide assistance," Harden said.

She said she doesn't know of any other organization in central Florida providing similar services to mothers who have decided to carry their babies to term after a negative diagnosis.

'Help them heal'

Christine Lawhon, who lives on Merritt Island, is one such mother. Her baby girl, Zoe, died a minute after she was born this May.

The 42-year-old has signed up as a volunteer for Cherishing the Journey.

"I have been blessed in a way because I have had a lot of people help me through this. I want to reach out to others and help them heal," she said.

Shawna Ehlers, an assistant professor of psychology at the College of Medicine, Mayo Clinic, said it is often "comforting and therapeutic to connect with other parents who've experienced infant death."

The burden might be even heavier, she wrote on the Mayo Clinic website, if a woman carries a baby to term after knowing that he will not survive.

Sometimes, a memorial can bring solace, she said.

A closer family

In the Harden household, Baby Matthew is a constant presence.

Photographs of the Harden family with Matthew have been uploaded on Cherishing the Journey's website. Their two children Abigail, 8, and Raleigh, 6, were told that their brother had become an angel. Both children were at the hospital in the short time their brother was alive.

When they draw family pictures, Harden said, the siblings always include Matthew.

The family has a Christmas ornament with Matthew's hand and footprints and an assortment of items from the hospital - a crib card, blankets and a bracelet.

Harden also still has her son's baptism outfit.

"I wanted something to keep that he had worn. That gown hangs in my son's closet and I take it out every so often and think about the time that I got to spend with him," she said.

Josh Harden, Jennifer's husband, said he supports his wife's effort to reach out to other parents. "It has brought us together as a family," he said.

For Jennifer, her son's all-too-brief life was packed with meaning. She talks animatedly about just having the chance to hold him.

"He did open his eyes and look at us. It was a beautiful thing," she said.

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Fundraiser in October

Cherishing the Journey will organize a fundraiser at Wickham Park in Melbourne on Oct. 15.

Registration is at 8 a.m. while a memory walk is at 9 a.m.

A butterfly release is also part of the day's events.

The cost for walkers ages 12 and up will be \$15. The butterfly release costs \$10. For more information, log on to www.cherishingthejourney.org

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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