Enhancing Support Through Peer Led Programs

"Because, sometimes it feels good to talk to people who just.. get it."

Our experience as NICU moms, and the inspiration to bring a peer support program to the Saint John Regional Hospital unit.

Dyllan Humphrey & Jessica Vanderlaan

WHO ARE WE?

Dyllan

- Mother of 2
- First child, Lyle, was born at term
- Willow was a 25-weeker micro preemie, born via emergency c-section due to placental abruption
- Spent 114 days in SJRH Neonatal ICU
- Connected with other preemie parents during her journey
- Became passionate about being a support to others after her personal experience.

Willow at 25 weeks

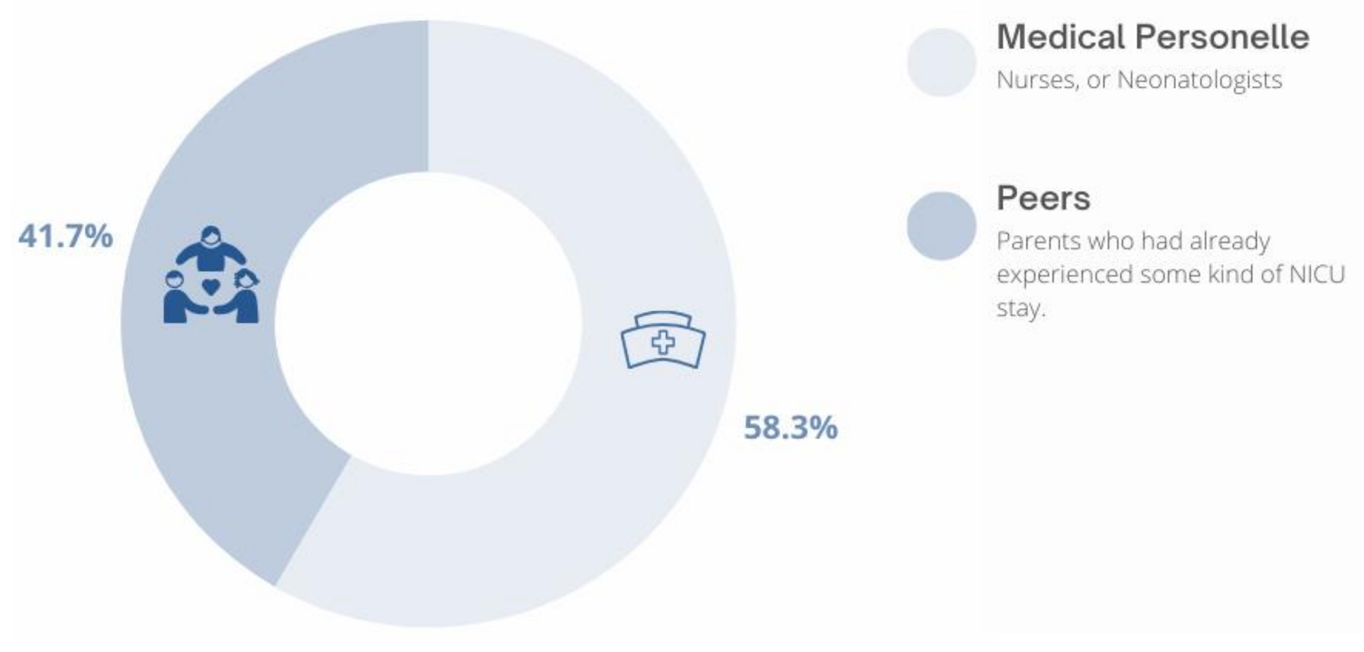
Jessica

Keith at 35 weeks

- Mother of 2
- Certified Doula & Childbirth Educator
- First child was induced at 35 weeks due to preeclampsia
- 2-week NICU stay during COVID
- Height of restrictions: lack of resources
- Passionate about supporting families through their pregnancy and postpartum experience

PARENT RESOURCES AT SJRH

We conducted an open-ended questionnaire on our personal Instagram pages that was available to our followers for 12 hours. Within this questionnaire we asked our followers who made them feel most supported in their NICU journey:



The Saint John Regional NICU team includes 4 Neonatologists, 25 Registered Nurses & shared Respiratory Therapists. The majority of admissions are preterm babies. Our NICU has 11 single rooms and a "family room".

The Hospital currently lacks any parent support programs; the only available support is a social worker. There are **no** mental health professionals, resources or assessments for parents. Our communities also lack in-person support programs for preterm parents.

OUR INSPIRATION

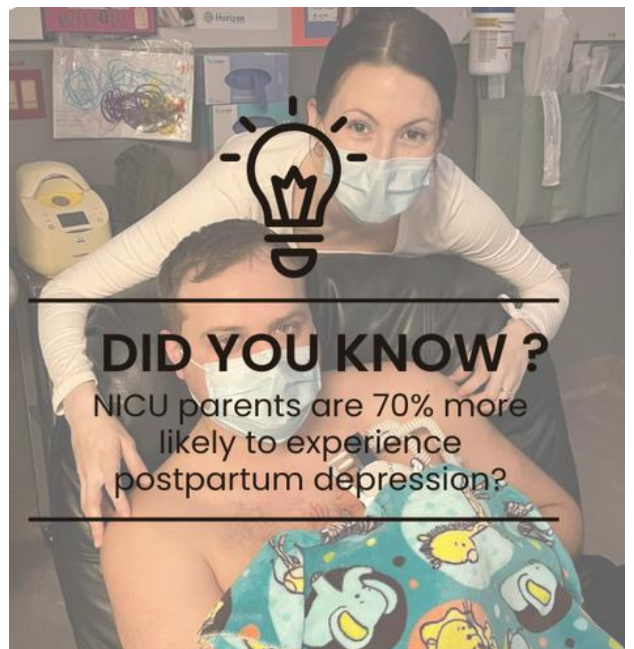
"HEALING IS NOT A LINEAR PROCESS, ESPECIALLY AFTER A NICU STAY. IT BEGINS THE MOMENT YOUR JOURNEY STARTS, NOT JUST WHEN YOU TAKE YOUR BABY HOME. EVERY STEP, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, IS PART OF THE JOURNEY TOWARDS HEALING AND STRENGTH." - Dyllan

Follow us on Instagram: @tinywarriorsalliance

We are both NICU moms with completely different experiences. Jess delivered Keith during COVID-19 and felt isolated, like she had no one to talk to. She often felt she was overstepping just by being in the NICU during those uncertain times. Peer support was non-existent, and on top of that, she and her husband had to visit separately due to restrictions. Being a Doula, she was aware of the gaps. However, living it is a whole different kind of lonely.

Dyllan's experience, in contrast, was quite different. She not only had the encouragement from Jess, but also from a couple of other NICU moms. Plus, her husband was allowed to visit with her, which made the journey a bit more bearable. Jessica was an amazing peer support to Dyllan, and since the birth of Willow, Dyllan's passion to offer that same positivity to other parents has only grown.

Each year, 30,000 premature babies are born in Canada. It was extremely important to us to start **"The Tiny Warriors Alliance"** to give back to the parents of these preemies and provide the support they need during such a challenging time.



DID YOU KNOW ?

NICU parents are 70% more likely to experience postpartum depression?

OUR GOAL

Tiny Warriors Alliance is a support group offered to current parents with babies in the NICU, as well as parents who experienced a NICU stay in the past. Our goal is to offer a nonjudgmental space for fellow preemie parents who are struggling navigating their current situation or having difficulty accepting their journey and require a listening ear. Our group will also connect parents to local resources who offer counselling services, Physiotherapy, trainers who specialize in PP strength building and more.

NICU parents can offer each other unique and powerful support by sharing their experiences, emotions, and coping strategies. Through mutual understanding, they provide reassurance that others truly understand the challenges and fears they are facing. This support helps reduce feelings of isolation and normalizes the difficult emotions of the NICU journey. Parents can share practical tips for navigating the hospital environment, managing stress, and advocating for their child's care.

By offering a listening ear, encouragement, and a sense of camaraderie, NICU parents create a network of emotional strength that fosters hope and resilience for one another. Building a peer support program will connect fellow preemie parents at an in-person level and offer consistent support, not only in our unit, but in small communities, creating opportunity to grow from the NICU experience and empower our peers.

MILESTONES

- Logo and name chosen
- Hospital location approved
- Social media launched
- Possible community locations found
- Connected with community professionals interested
- Becoming Parent Partners with CPBF

PRIORITIES

- Funding for basic operations
- Official recognition from the Hospital
- CPBF Training
- SJRH Volunteer Training
- NICU staff awareness

CONCLUSION

In our experience, our community lacks peer support for parents who have experienced a NICU stay. The "Tiny Warriors Alliance" aims to bridge this gap. With the NICU team's support, we plan to transform the Family Room into a gathering space, offering parents encouragement, resources, and a place to feel heard.

Teaming up with our local Neonatologists and educating ourselves in peer support, we will be able to offer a unique program that will extend support in hospital and beyond.