

# Methodist Healthcare Nurse Pioneers Citywide Effort to Support Patients Grieving Infant Loss

Pregnancy is a time of great excitement and change as couples anticipate adding a new child to their families. For this reason, the loss of an infant can be heartbreaking, and the grief that parents experience following the loss of a child can be difficult to overcome.

For many years, there was little recognition of infant loss in the hospital setting. Grieving parents often were left to struggle with isolation and depression on their own.

Christine Niekamp, RN, charge nurse at Methodist Hospital and Methodist Children's Hospital, was one of the first health care professionals in San Antonio to realize the importance of providing support to couples experiencing perinatal loss, which is the death of an infant during pregnancy or soon thereafter. Perinatal loss includes miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal death.

Niekamp had seen the effect of unresolved grief in her own family through an aunt who lost twins in the '50s. "Unresolved grief probably contributed to some of the difficulties she had in her life," she said.

Niekamp understood that families need to be given the opportunity to grieve and gain closure and she wanted to help women who have not been able to deal with their grief—sometimes for years—begin to heal.

## The Walk to Remember

Niekamp has organized and championed the perinatal bereavement program at Methodist for the last 17 years and organized the "Walk to Remember," a citywide community event that provides support for families grieving the loss of their babies. In doing this Niekamp has provided an amazing service, not only for Methodist, but for all of San Antonio.

She works all year to prepare for the "Walk to Remember." Open to the public without charge each October, it gives families the opportunity to grieve by having speakers, prayers, music, and networking with other families willing to share their stories. More than 300 people attended the event last year.

The walk has had a profound impact on the community. One woman has attended each year for 10 years. A woman who attended as

a Methodist Healthcare employee confided to Niekamp that participating in the walk helped her grieve for her personal losses for the first time.

Kiekamp has been a labor and delivery nurse at Methodist Hospital since graduating from Incarnate Word College in 1984. One of her first perinatal loss patients was a painting teacher. She was an inspiration for Kiekamp's efforts.

"When she was my patient, I was a new nurse and felt woefully unprepared to take care of her," said Niekamp. "There had been no formal perinatal loss education in my nursing program nor in my orientation to labor and delivery."

"My mentors said encourage her to see her baby, hold her baby and name her baby, a relatively new concept in the mid '80s," continued Neikamp. "She had a tiny baby who lived for a short time. She and her husband held him and what I remember was that we wrapped him in a wash cloth because he was so tiny. I also remember that the only thing I could offer her as a remembrance was his name written in my best calligraphy on a commemorative birth certificate."

Niekamp met this patient again in 1996 when she took a decorative painting class. When the instructor found out where Niekamp worked, she remembered her doctor, but not Niekamp as her nurse. She also told Niekamp how alone she felt after the loss and that she did not receive support from her family.

## Painting Class Leads to Memory Boxes

Allowing patients to participate in the grieving process with memory boxes, commemorative birth certificates and other mmeementos is important. Recalling her teacher's loss, Niekamp painted a memory box and set of memory cards for her baby. Because of that outreach, the painting teacher, who had been Niekamp's patient and now her friend, works with her students on memory boxes for the hospital and has



Christine Niekamp recently was named one of three winners of the 2018 Graceann Durr Methodist Healthcare Humanitarian Awards, recognizing her outstanding commitment to the humanitarian values that are the foundation of the organization. Barry Burns, Vice President of Human Resources for Methodist Healthcare, presented the award, recognizing her efforts in perinatal bereavement in the system and throughout the community.

provided them for 16 years. "It seemed serendipitous that she and her family had made such an impression on me and that many years later, she thought me the skills to make items that might help others," said Niekamp.

Methodist Healthcare began developing a perinatal loss program in 2001, and Niekamp was one of the original members of the committee. She has chaired the Bereavement Committee at the hospital, which meets monthly, for 17 years. For the program at Methodist, she also coordinates the supply of memory boxes, bracelets, birth certificates, and other supplies. In addition, Neikamp educates the staff and keeps everyone up-to-date on the policies and processes for families that have a pregnancy loss.

Reaching out to other Methodist Healthcare hospitals, Christine has worked to standardize and facilitate bereavement care throughout the system.

Her efforts were recognized earlier this year when she was named one of three winners of the 2018 Graceann Durr Methodist Healthcare Humanitarian Awards, recognizing her outstanding commitment to the humanitarian values that are the foundation of the organization.

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