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Selling the 'Ooh' Factor

BROOKLINE, N.H. -- When Patty Nagle and Shannon Dwyer became neighbors in 2003, they quickly learned they shared something special: Both had delivered premature children.

In fact, Dwyer was in the hospital with her second son when Nagle's family moved to Brookline, a quiet community of about 6,000 people that borders Massachusetts at Townsend.

"We became more than neighbors; we became friends who had a connection," said Nagle, who is originally from Billerica.

As the women talked more about their experiences, particularly their frequent visits to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) -- Patty with twins Daniel and Patrick, now 5, and Shannon with Robbie, 6, and Jake, 3 -- both realized that something was missing in their lives when they were separated from their children. They said going home after giving birth and having to leave their children behind was excruciatingly painful. It also made them think about what, if anything, could have made that transition easier.

Nagle and Dwyer came up with the idea to create a signature collection of items whose sole purpose was to strengthen the bond between parent and child when they were apart.

"We knew that it was a way for us to give back to families that were going through what we went through," said Nagle.

In May, the women launched the business, Early Bird Baby, LLC, an online boutique that allows customers to purchase keepsake boxes that include a number of select items for parent and baby.

The NICU Signature Box for Premies, for example, contains such items as a Baby Lovie blanket, which absorbs the mother's scent; a combination clock/picture frame/voice recorder; a custom journal and pen set; and a matching gown and hat with velcro closure to deal with the many tubes and wires often attached to NICU babies.

Nagle said every item was hand-picked to ensure that every parent and child develop a special bond when they are apart.

"We wanted to have that "ooh" factor," she said.

Early Bird Baby also offers signature collections for moms with cancer and parents on military deployment -- both matters that resonate personally with Dwyer.

In July 2005, at age 32, Dwyer was diagnosed with colorectal cancer. With a 4-year-old and 18-month-old at home, she found it difficult to be away from her children.

"It was the hardest thing I probably ever had to do," said Dwyer, a former second-grade teacher in Westford.

She said having Early Bird Baby items helped her stay connected. And when her husband, Robert, was deployed to Iraq later that year, it created the same feeling of separation.

"We wanted Early Bird Baby to be a vehicle for us to give back," said Dwyer. "We want other families to have a little help."

For every Signature NICU box sold, the women donate \$10 to the March of Dimes NICU Family Support Project, which works to aid families in their journeys through the NICU and beyond.

The gift boxes retail from \$55 to \$180. The two women are also working on building partnerships between their company and hospitals and/or corporate partners, where a company could purchase the boxes for its employees who find themselves in similar circumstances, or a hospital could distribute the boxes to patients.

Nagle and Dwyer also decided to start their own fund -- Early Baby Fund -- which takes a percentage of profits from other collections to help families with the everyday expenses they may face when a child or parent is in the hospital. Customers can also donate a box to a NICU of their choice in support of, in memory of, or simply for any family who might need hope that day.

Nagle and Dwyer hope to give parents a mission when they leave the hospital, even if they can't take their child home. They want all parents to have something to put in their nurseries.

"Our long-term hope is that no mother has to walk out of an NICU empty-handed," said Shannon.