



T&G STAFF/PAUL KAPTEYN

Registered nurse Lynn Ellsworth of North Grafton plays with her former patient, Luke Goyette, 11 months, of Millbury during the UMass Memorial Neonatal Intensive Care Unit's 40th anniversary celebration Saturday.

UMass Neonatal unit turns 40

More than 20,000 infants assisted

By Michael Gelbwasser

CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — Aaron Bissell spent his infancy fighting for survival in the UMass Memorial Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Now, 21 years later, "I'm well. I'm doing a lot of writing. And I take singing lessons. I pretty much do a lot of creative stuff," said Mr. Bissell, of Grafton.

The neonatal intensive care unit's 40th birthday was celebrated Saturday at the UMass Memorial Medical Center — University Campus, 55 Lake Ave. North. Numerous former patients of all ages gathered for a group photo on the front lawn.

The festivities celebrated "all the families that were able to have their children come

home with them," to remember the children "that left this world, frankly, too soon," and to thank the families for letting the doctors and nurses "care for their children," said Dr. Alan Picarillo, the UMass Memorial Medical Center's chief of neonatology.

"It was a total privilege of caring for these children," he said. "These families would leave them with us for long periods of time."

The unit has cared for more than 20,000 infants since opening in 1974 with six beds, hospital officials said. The program now has 49 beds. Aaron Bissell and his twin brother Eric, born at 26 weeks, were treated "at the

old NICU, over at Memorial Hospital," in 1993, according to their mother, Cynthia.

"I can tell you, the first couple of years, both of the boys were very medically fragile. It was totally scary," she said. "I'm a nurse, so I knew the risks involved in twins being born 3 1/2 months too soon."

"I really came here today to thank some of the doctors. I remember all of them," Mrs. Bissell added.

Dr. Picarillo said "the caring of the front-line staff" has been the one constant during the unit's 40-year history.

"The amount of time they spend with the families, comforting them, encouraging them, empowering them. That's what hasn't changed," he said.

Dr. Picarillo noted that infants brought to the unit are living longer than ever.

"In 1974, typically under 28 weeks wouldn't survive at all. Now, we routinely save babies with 23 weeks," he said.

Triplets Jameson, Payton and Callie Kaska of Northbridge are now 3 years old, said their mother, Lindsay. Their earliest days were "an emotional roller-coaster ride, living day to day," Mrs. Kaska said. Now, the kids "are amazing. They're right on target. They're healthy," she said.

Many families and staff re-connected on Saturday. Nurse Christina Evans was especially proud of Edward Parker Gagne, 4, of Holden.

"This little guy was one of my first babies I cared for," said Ms. Evans, who has worked in the unit for 14 years.

"To see him where he is today brings tears to my eyes."



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