

August 17, 2007: The Broadcaster
Bonds of Premature Infants
Develops into Brookline Moms'
Baby-Gift Business

Shannon Dwyer and Patty Nagle found themselves sharing motherhood experiences after meeting casually when Patty and Roy Nagle moved into the neighborhood where Shannon Dwyer and her husband Robert live.

Both are mothers of premature babies, or "preemies." "Patty moved in next door, and I had wanted to introduce ourselves, but didn't really have a lot of time," Shannon Dwyer recalled recently. "Finally we talked over the phone. We spoke about our families and I mentioned that I had a premature baby, and Patty said, 'Have you started your five-day count yet.' Right then I knew there was something between us."

A "five-day count" is when a premature baby can go five consecutive days without intervention by nurses or doctors. Often, Shannon Dwyer said, premature babies have apnea spells that cause them to stop breathing for no apparent reason, for which intervention is needed. When a premature infant can go five days without a spell, the child can often be released from the hospital's intensive care unit.

Ironically, Patty Nagle had twins, now 5, who were premature at birth. Her neighbor had two premature boys herself, Robbie, now 6, and Jake, 3. Both had been born about 10 weeks premature.

The two women quickly found they had the same challenges with their premature children. What proved mutually difficult, they discovered, was being away from their babies when they spent time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Shannon Dwyer's babies had spent two months at the NICU at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, while Patty Nagle's babies had been cared for at the NICU at Winchester (Mass.) Hospital.

"This kind of separation inhibits the bonding mothers innately desire," Shannon Dwyer said.

The women found few resources that offered simple ways to help parents bond with their children. Thinking other mothers must feel the same, the two began assembling tools that parents of newborns, twins and preemies need to enrich the bonding experience. That led to the creation of Early Bird Baby, LLC, a business the women run out of Dwyers' Pope Road home.

"We came up with the idea in March 2005," Shannon Dwyer recalled. "We started researching, met with focus groups and tried some things out with our own kids."

But in July 2005, Shannon Dwyer was diagnosed with cancer, and that put a halt to their project. She spent more than 100 days in the hospital, and endured seven months of chemotherapy and six weeks of radiation. She is cancer-free now, but during her battle, she realized that bonding with your children was "larger than just premature babies."

"Trying to stay close to your kids when circumstances keep you apart is the bigger issue," she realized.

The launch of Early Bird Baby finally came in May 2007. "We announced the enterprise at a small launch party at Hampshire Hills on May 6," Shannon Dwyer recalled.

The two women began creating gift boxes for parents, keepsakes that include select items that are meant to enrich the bond between parent and baby. The gift boxes include items such as Baby Lovie by Swaddle Designs, a silky soft security blanket that absorbs a parent's scent to help soothe a young baby; Creamie Bear by Mary Mayer of Vermont, a baby's first soft bear toy; a custom journal and pen set; a disposable camera to leave with the child's nurse or caregiver and a purse-size voice recorder.

The nascent Internet company also offers a "donate a box" program, which allows families of individuals to donate an Early Bird Baby Box to hospitals for other parents. "Finding the perfect gift for a new parent who is apart from their newborn is easier than ever before," said Patty Nagle.

Early Bird Baby also donates \$10 from the sale of gift boxes to the March of Dimes NICU Family Support Project. A percentage of their profits from the sales of other collections are donated to the Early Bird Baby Fund, which will be used to help defer costs associated with hospital stays and travel costs. "Just parking in Boston for a couple months, at \$25 per day, can be expensive," Shannon Dwyer said.

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.

"We're working on a lot of fronts. We really feel like we've crafted a niche product. It's soft, it's pretty, well-made and high end. And it can ease the tensions and confusions of mothers who have to be, for whatever reason, separated from their babies for any length of time," Patty Nagle said.

More information on Early Bird Baby and its gift collection can be obtained by calling 603-673-3498, or visiting www.earlybirdbaby.com.

