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Special gift boxes for babies,
parents bring Auburn native to attention of CNBC

BROOKLINE, N.H. - Shannon Dwyer has learned a lot from her two sons, Robbie and Jake.

Born 11 weeks and 10 weeks prematurely, the two babies are now healthy boys of 6 and almost 4. But their first weeks were round-the-clock struggles with tubes and medical machinery. Dwyer thought of that often as she battled colorectal cancer last year.

"These two little kids give you your strength, especially with the way they came into the world," she said. "They did it; I can, too."

These days, Dwyer feels well - well enough to tape a segment for a CNBC business show two weeks ago. The segment, which is scheduled to appear on CNBC's "The Big Idea" with Donny Deutsch, profiles another inspiration from Robbie and Jake: Early Bird Baby gift boxes for separated parents and babies.

"My neighbor is also the mom of preemies, so we started talking about all the things we'd wished we had when they were born," said Dwyer, a native of Auburn who moved to New Hampshire with her husband about six years ago. Drawing on their mutual experiences, the women designed care packages for babies and their parents, which they sell at www.earlybirdbaby.com.

Within each custom-designed box: a journal; security blankets that absorb Mom or Dad's scent; a swaddling blanket; a special, cream-colored teddy bear; a preemie outfit with matching cap; and a disposable camera.

"The nurses tell you to bring things from home for the Isolette, but you never think of (doing) that," Dwyer said. "The baby's not due yet. ... I hadn't even had my shower when Robbie was born."

The two women launched their Web-based business last spring and have been busy ever since. Together they fill orders while raising their five boys.

"I told the cameraman it would be kind of noisy," Dwyer said with a laugh. The CNBC crew followed Dwyer and her business partner, Patty Nagle, for an entire day as they picked up kids from school, hand-wrapped items for Early Bird Baby gift boxes and watched them "generally run the business and do the mom thing," she said.

The show is expected to air before Christmas; producers couldn't be more specific. Dwyer said another New Hampshire businesswoman who was profiled on the show contacted her to let her know the flood gates likely will open on orders.

"She asked, 'Are you ready for this? You won't believe the response,'" Dwyer said. "Who knows? We're doing as much prep work now as we can."

She and Nagle were very careful when they planned the business, making sure that the gift boxes and contents were unique and appealing. Everything was considered: The nose on the Vermont-made Creamie teddy bear is the same color as the cocoa-powder gift boxes.

"My mom taught me that presentation is everything," Dwyer said. "It has to be just so."

Since the initial launch last May, Early Bird Baby has expanded to offer tailored gift boxes for other situations where parents and their babies are separated. Drawing again from her own experience, one gift box helps babies and parents deal with cancer; another with military deployment.

"I was in the hospital for 100 nights," she said, recovering from five surgeries and seven months of chemotherapy, followed by radiation.

In the middle of that, her husband, Robert, got orders to ship out to Iraq. The couple has been together since their days at Auburn's Walton School when Dwyer was still Shannon Skillings.

"You wonder how many hits you can take," said Dwyer, smiling. "But he's home safe and sound now."

And there's more good news. Some high-end retailers have inquired about carrying Early Bird Baby gift boxes in their stores. The moms donate a portion of each sale (the boxes range in price from \$75 to \$125) to targeted charities such as March of Dimes.

Some day, they'd like to use the profits from their business to build a Ronald McDonald-type house for parents of preemie babies in Boston. But first they need to make the profits.

"I can say we're busy," Dwyer said. "By next year, I hope we can reveal our sales volume. It's definitely building."

"Hopefully, the show will give us a little bit of a boost."