

Nursing a new ambition

By Nicole Mooradian, Staff writer

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Nurse Ramona Ackermann helps as Emily DeRecat, 18, holds Jomar Alexander Magana in the neonatal intensive care unit at Miller Children's Hospital in Long Beach. DeRecat, who wants to be a neonatal nurse, was cared for by Ackerman as a baby. (Jeff Gritchen / Press-Telegram)

LONG BEACH - As Emily deRecat held the tiny infant in her arms, she smiled.

"Seeing babies (this) small puts it in perspective," she said.

Emily was at the Miller Children's Hospital to spend the day in preparation for a future in neonatal nursing. As an infant, the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit saved her life.

Emily, now 18, weighed only 1 pound, 13

ounces when she was born in 1988 after just 24 weeks in her mother's womb - 16 weeks premature.

She spent 109 days in the hospital under the care of nurses Ramona Ackermann, Chris Viscione and Jody King.

Babies born at 24 weeks face numerous potential problems, Ackermann and Viscione said. The babies are not developed enough, their lungs

generally aren't viable, they have problems with nutrition and their blood vessels are so fragile that a simple increase in blood

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pressure can cause bleeding in the brain.

"Every baby's different," Ackermann said.
"Emily was strong."

According to Viscione, at that time, Emily was so small the nurses used to cut the tops off the diapers to make them fit. At that time, it was rare for a "24-weeker" to survive without any problems.

"Things have changed a lot in the last 18 years," Ackermann said.

Because many of the babies born prematurely stay in the neonatal unit until near their original due date, the nurses spend as much - if not more - time with the infants as the babies' families.

"(Nurses) can easily become family," King said.

Viscione remembered Emily's family as one that was devoted to the well-being of the infant.

Emily's older sister Alyson, then 2 years old, was too young to be allowed into the neonatal intensive care unit. Instead, she watched at a window as the nurses and her family showed her the new baby in the other room.

"We got attached to all of them," Viscione said.

After Emily went home, the deRecats and Ackermann stayed in touch, sending Christmas cards.

Emily grew to be a healthy young woman who rode horses and spent her time volunteering at the J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center, where she helped children and adults learn to ride.

The only long-term effects from her days in the NICU are some scars and a paralyzed vocal chord.

"She doesn't have any lasting problems," Ackermann said.

When Emily finished her years at JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, her mother sent Ackermann a graduation announcement. Included was a note saying Emily wanted to be a neonatal nurse, just like the women who cared for her so many years ago.

Ackermann then invited Emily to spend the day at Miller Children's Hospital.

And so, nearly 19 years later, Emily returned

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to the NICU this week to observe one of her primary nurses.

A "really excited" Emily started her day in the hospital at 6:45 a.m. She watched as Ackermann changed diapers, checked patient charts, and fed infants.

In one unit of the NICU, she saw an infant born that day who was 16 weeks early - just like Emily.

"It was really crazy to see (a baby that small)," she said. "It was really cool."

Emily is not the first in her family with an interest in nursing. Her grandmother was a labor and delivery nurse.

After her grandmother's death five years ago at age 75, Emily's interest in nursing grew. As a junior in high school, she decided to pursue it as a career. An anatomy course during her senior year heightened her interest in the profession.

This fall, Emily will follow in her grandmother's footsteps and attend Cal S tate Chico, as a pre-nursing student. She wants to enroll in the university's acclaimed nursing program, and eventually become a neonatal nurse.

"Knowing you're doing something that's helping others" is important, she said.

Her family also never let her forget the efforts of the nurses in the NICU.

"My middle name is `Hope,'" she said.

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