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Special Deliveries

Mom uses baby boutique to make sure parents of premature infants know they're not alone

BY MARISSA RODRIGUEZ



PHOTOS COURTESY LUCERO SALINAS/ENCANTO ROJO

In her monogrammed striped dresses and bonnets, Sadie Saunders is every bit the 3-year-old fashionista. As the daughter of Karen Saunders, owner of Bambinos baby and children's boutique, Sadie naturally has an impeccable wardrobe of clothes and accessories. But her very first outfit wasn't purchased; it was lovingly handmade by volunteers with the nonprofit Threads of Love.

Born 10 weeks early, Sadie weighed only 2 pounds 8 ounces, and until that care package arrived Saunders had precious little to dress her baby in. The pair of knit booties, hat and top—hardly larger than the palm of a hand—were among the first gifts that Sadie received during her stay in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) and Saunders says they were certainly among the most meaningful.

New parents dealing with premature or medically fragile babies can feel so helpless, says Saunders, especially since their medical needs often mean parents have limited opportunities to hold or interact with their infants. "So, dressing them—putting on a bootie or a gown—is all there is to look forward to until you can start feeding them and bathing them," she says.



Yet, the kind of tiny clothes that can keep a fragile baby comfortable and accommodate the wires and monitors they require while in the NICU are often tough to come by. Even when Sadie and her older sister Annie, who also was born premature, were able to wear standard preemie sizes, shopping proved frustrating as selections were slim.



So when the opportunity to purchase Bambinos presented itself in 2015, Saunders, a former bank vice president, seized the chance. "I immediately knew I wanted to focus the charitable mission of the store to serve families of preemies and medically fragile infants because that is what I am most passionate about," says Saunders, who partners with Threads of Love and Hand to Hold, an Austin-based nonprofit that offers support to parents of premature babies.

She has expanded the store's carefully curated collection of high-end labels to also include a variety of preemie styles, and when a needed style or size isn't available, she works with designers to create pieces. Shoppers in search of items for premature infants can be dealing with a lot of stress and emotions, so the Bambinos staff is trained to handle a spectrum of requests and take pride in walking alongside customers even in tough circumstances. They'll also send items to the NICU when needed.

Last month, Saunders launched the store's first namesake collection, which will include preemie and eventually

micro-preemie sizes. It may be just a onesie or a dress, but for Saunders it's also a way of sharing hope and letting customers know they're not alone. "I've talked with them, cried with them and hugged them," she says.

3 Shopping Tips

For gifting to premature infants

Get store staff involved Depending on the style, brand and fabric, garments may not fit preemies as expected. Ask staff for help selecting an item for a particular size or weight.

Customize it Even when positive outcomes are uncertain, don't be wary of monograms, Saunders says. Personalized gifts shows parents their baby deserves the same special attention as any newborn.

Think ahead Preemies won't stay small forever. A gift of a newborn- or 3-month-sized outfit is also helpful.

Prematurity in SA

A premature birth is one that occurs before 37 weeks of pregnancy. An infant is considered a micro-preemie when born before 26 weeks.

Percent of live births that are premature:

9.6 %: U.S.

10.2 %: Texas

11%: Bexar County

Bexar County has the highest rate of the state's six largest counties