

EYEBROW

A Story of Survival and Advocacy

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WHEN JENNIFER AND JOE VALERIO welcomed their triplet daughters the day before Thanksgiving in 1996, they weren't sure what the future would hold. And while any new parent would tell you the same, it was the exceptional circumstances for the Valerios that made the future seem all the more uncertain.

“For seven weeks prior to that moment, my husband, a team of doctors, and I had been battling to hold off labor long enough for our precious babies to be viable—it’s hard to articulate how difficult those long weeks were,” says Jennifer Valerio. “For someone used to having control of her life and seeing hard work and preparation pay off, it felt like falling into a scary, dark, and deep hole.”

Born at just 26 weeks and weighing little more than a pound each, Taylor, Hailey, and Madison Valerio’s journey was just getting started. Their survival would depend on the determination of their parents, the expertise of their doctors, and lifesaving research made possible by March of Dimes.

“We knew our daughters would not have survived their early birth if it weren’t for March of Dimes-backed research and the medical progress that they produced,” recalls Jennifer.

Treatments like surfactant therapy, which helps premature babies’ underdeveloped lungs function, and the very existence of specialized NICUs were pioneered through March of Dimes-backed discoveries. In the decades since the Valerio triplets were born, the organization has continued to invest in advances that shape life after birth, from improving care protocols inside NICUs to funding research into conditions like necrotizing enterocolitis, a life-threatening intestinal disease.

“There were two different kinds of challenges in the NICU,” explains Jennifer. “Ones that had to do with the babies’ immediate health and ones that had to do with their future development.”



Programs like NICU Family Support® were created to address those very realities, helping families navigate long hospital stays while strengthening the critical bond between parents and their babies.

In the United States, preterm birth and low birth weight are among the leading causes of infant death, hitting Black and American Indian/Alaska Native families the hardest. And for the babies who survive, the struggle doesn’t end at birth — many spend weeks or months in the NICU and face ongoing risks such as developmental delays, vision and hearing loss, and chronic health issues.

“We worried about the impact of ventilator use on their lungs, the separation from us on their emotional development, and prematurity on their cognitive and physical growth,” remembers Jennifer.

Despite medical advances, prematurity remains a national crisis with profound short- and long-term impacts.



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When the girls finally came home, the Valerios carried with them both gratitude and a sense of responsibility. In 1998, the family became a March of Dimes ambassadors, sharing their story at events across the region.

At first, Jennifer and Joe did most of the talking, while their toddlers added a few simple words. But over time, Taylor, Hailey, and Madison found their own voices. The sisters grew up immersed in advocacy that not only gave them perspective on their earliest days but also shaped the careers they have today.

“Growing up sharing our story, meeting other ambassador families as well as NICU staff and researchers, I really saw the impact that the NICU staff had on our lives and other NICU babies,” says Madison Valerio, now a NICU nurse at Christiana Hospital.

And Madison isn’t alone. Each sister took something different from their early days and built careers that connected back to their beginnings with March of Dimes.

“Our early life definitely influenced my journey,” says Taylor, a pediatric resident at Nemours Children’s Hospital. Her goal is to become a neonatologist, the same kind of doctor who once cared for her.

“It was through the March of Dimes that I first got to meet doctors and researchers [since] I grew up going to events where they would share their research,” remembers Taylor. “I always felt so inspired and grateful for the role they played in the care and innovation that allowed my sisters and me to have a healthy start.”

While Madison and Taylor were inspired to pursue medical careers, Hailey went on a different—equally vital—path to law and health policy.

“My interest in law and health policy stemmed from the realization that if we had been born into different circumstances with less access to affordable health care, we likely would not have survived,” notes Hailey.

Today, Hailey practices law while continuing to advocate for maternal and child health through her work with March of Dimes.

“I remain committed to the mission of improving maternal and child health by channeling my legal expertise into supporting organizations like the March of Dimes—whether that means strengthening governance, ensuring compliance, or fostering strategic partnerships,” she says.

The Valerio family exemplifies how far medical innovations have come with the help of March of Dimes funding and research. But, as Jennifer notes, there is still work to be done.

“We can’t yet prevent preterm birth, but how we respond to it matters and has lifelong implications,” says Jennifer. “I hope people walk away from our story wanting to fight for the same access to care for all mothers and babies and continued funding for relevant research so that more families can have outcomes like ours.”

