

# Honoring Hailey

## Six parents unite with one mission

By David McKay Wilson

**T**hree couples from Binghamton's Class of 1992 had 10 children among them. One, in particular, has united their families in ways that go far beyond blood ties and marriage vows.

Her name is Hailey, and she weighed 12 ounces when born prematurely at 21 weeks in 2003, dying minutes after birth. Donna and Isaac Zion's daughter was not the first, nor the last, of the three couples' children to struggle at birth. Nine of the 10 babies born to the couples — the Zions, Debra and Jeffrey Randazzo, and Suzanne and David Decina — began their lives in a neonatal intensive care unit, known as the NICU, where, with the exception of Hailey, they overcame premature births or complications from their deliveries.

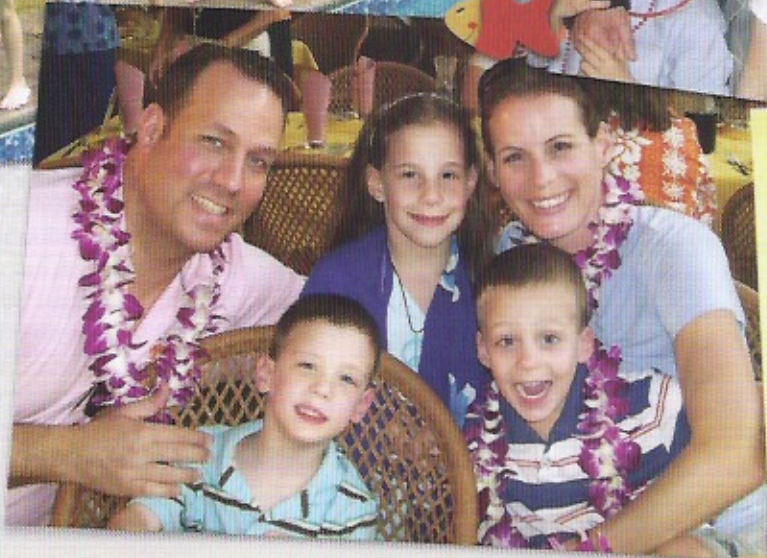
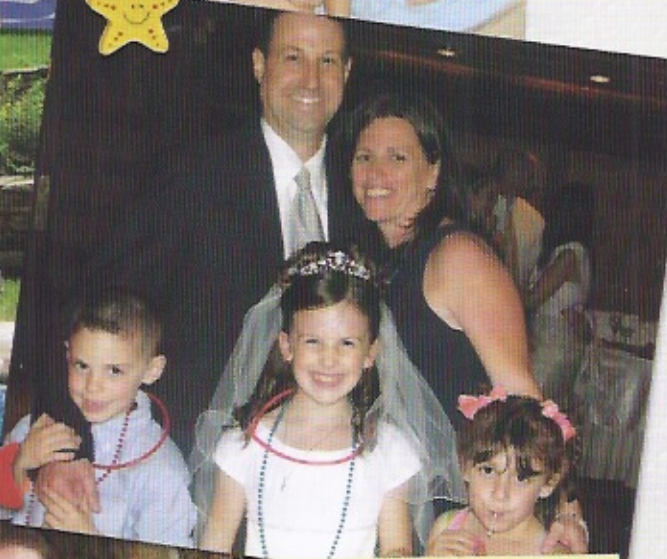
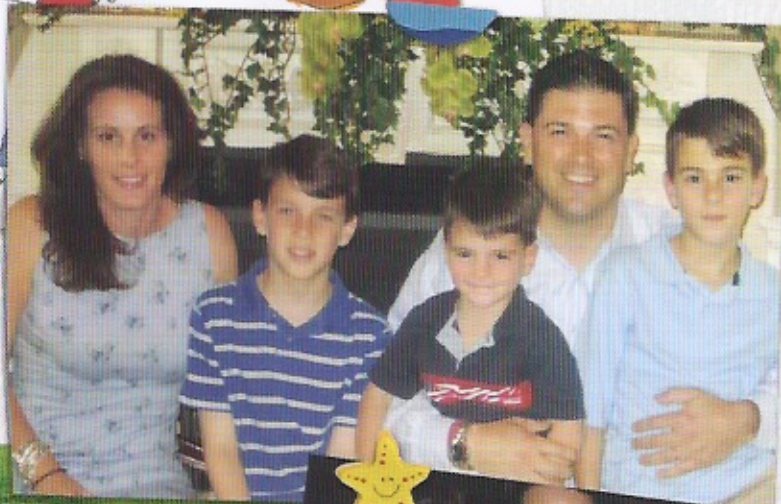
Those experiences tightened the already strong

bond among the classmates (Debra and Donna are twins.) Four years after Hailey's death, Jeffrey Randazzo established Hailey's Hope Foundation, which helps families in need who have premature and critically ill babies hospitalized in the NICU at the Maria Fareri Children's Center at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, N.Y.

"The NICU can be paralyzing for families," says Donna, 40, who lives with her husband and three children in Rye, N.Y. "Nothing can prepare you to see your newborn baby suffering and hooked up to countless wires and machines," she says. "No one talks about the NICU in pregnancy books. Anyone who has been through it will tell you they are overwhelmed."

Hailey's Hope Foundation provides families with financial support for nonmedical expenses





**Top:** The Randazzos. From left: mom Debra, Jeffrey, Dylan, dad Jeffrey and Matthew.

**Center right:** The Decinas. Parents David and Suzanne, Jeffrey, Taylor and Madison.

**Bottom:** The Zions. Dad Isaac, Alence, mom Donna, Jake and Kaden.





**Above:** Jeffrey, Dylan and Matthew Randazzo.

**Left:** The Randazzo, Zion and Decina children. Eight of the nine surviving children spent time in the NICU, but all are healthy.

such as lodging, meals and transportation to the hospital. When a baby leaves the NICU, parents are given a Hailey's Hope tote filled with a diaper bag, newborn clothes and other baby essentials.

The foundation also has helped fund neonatal research on auditory processing in NICU babies. The study is being conducted at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, in conjunction with Harvard University Medical School. In February 2011, the foundation sponsored the construction of two kitchens at the new Ronald McDonald House on the grounds of Maria Fareri Children's Hospital, where many NICU parents will live while their babies are hospitalized.

"We named our charity Hailey's Hope Foundation in memory of Hailey. We bring hope and

comfort to families to help them overcome the challenges of a NICU and fulfill the needs of their sick babies," Debra says.

#### Bonding in the NICU

High-tech NICUs have revolutionized the care of premature babies, whose respiratory and neural systems aren't well developed and need support before they can live at home. Patricia Reuther '96, MS '08, clinical instructor at Binghamton's Decker School of Nursing, says it's important for parents to spend time with their babies in the NICU, as parent-child bonding begins.

A technique called kangaroo care, for example, in which a mother holds her baby against her skin, helps stabilize the child. Skin-to-skin contact with a nursing mother can produce antibodies in her breast milk to combat bacteria on the baby's skin.

"Being there makes it feel like the child is their baby, not the hospital's baby," Reuther says.

Since its inception in December 2007, Hailey's Hope Foundation has raised more than \$300,000 and helped at least 500 families. In 2010, it provided \$82,000 in direct financial support to NICU families at Maria Fareri Children's Hospital, which serves a seven-county region that stretches from the Bronx border to Port Jervis on the Pennsylvania line. This NICU is one of New York's 17 regional centers that cares for the most critically ill babies and annually treats about 750 of the

#### PREEMIES ON THE RISE

**Babies born between 37 and 42 completed weeks** of pregnancy are called full-term. In the United States, about 12.8 percent of babies (more than half a million a year) are born prematurely; and most of those are born between 34 and 36 weeks' gestation. The rate of premature birth has increased by 36 percent since the early 1980s, mostly because of Caesarean deliveries of pre-term babies.

Source: The March of Dimes



region's 23,000 newborns.

"Paying attention to the needs of the moms and dads is very important," says Dr. Edmund La Gamma, the medical center's chief of newborn medicine. "It makes life easier for parents during a very stressful time, when their hopes and dreams get refigured."

That was surely the case for the three Binghamton couples. Debra (Beato) Randazzo, Donna (Beato) Zion's twin sister, was the first of the three mothers to spend her postpartum weeks in the NICU. During her pregnancy, Debra developed HELLP Syndrome, a potentially fatal condition that causes a pregnant woman's blood-platelet count to plummet and liver enzymes to skyrocket, sending her system into a downward spiral that can be reversed only by delivering the baby by emergency Caesarean section.

While full-term pregnancies last at least 37 weeks after conception, the Randazzos' son, Matthew, was born at 28 weeks. He was 2 pounds, 8 ounces, and the NICU at Stony Brook University Medical Center was his home for eight weeks. Fifteen months later, Jeffrey was born at full-term, but he had fluid in his lungs and required a day in the NICU. Then HELLP Syndrome struck again four years later when Dylan was born at 33 weeks. His NICU stay lasted four weeks.

"A NICU hospitalization really takes a toll on families," says Debra, 40, of Goshen, N.Y. "With Matthew, we were living 25 miles from Stony Brook and visiting multiple times a day. It is heartbreaking to know that there are families who are unable to visit and be with their babies whenever they want."

Like her twin, Donna also suffered from HELLP Syndrome. After Hailey's death, the Zions went on to have three more children, and the syndrome struck three more times. Daughter Alence was born at 30 weeks; son Jake at 32 weeks; then Kaden at 34 weeks. All began their lives in the NICU at Greenwich Hospital, Greenwich, Conn.

"It was so hard to juggle everything," says Isaac Zion, co-chief investment officer at SL Green Realty Corp. "You had demands at home and at work, but you wanted to be with your baby in the hospital. It was a nightmare."

#### Friends to rely on

The close friendship between the six classmates began soon after they arrived in Binghamton in 1988. They'd meet for pizza at 3 a.m. at Marinelli's or hang out with friends at the Cash Inn or the

Rat. That camaraderie continued through graduation, resulted in weddings and extended into the NICU, where they found comfort and support in each other as their babies struggled to survive.

Suzanne (Shickler) and David Decina's daughter, Taylor, had a fever at birth and spent four days in the NICU. Then came twins, Madison and Jeffrey. Madison had a punctured lung and didn't go home for 11 days. Jeffrey was the only one among 10 to not require a NICU stay.

"It didn't matter whose child it was in the NICU — we were all there for each other, day and night," says Sue, 40, of North Bellmore, N.Y.

"Everybody was always back and forth to the NICU. The support was amazing," says David, 40, vice president of corporate partnerships for the New York Islanders.

Running a charity requires considerable time and effort. These Binghamton couples, along with Ann and Marvin Siegel, Donna and Debra's mom and stepfather, raise money and run its programs. Jeffrey Randazzo, president of Sharp Business Systems, also is president of Hailey's Hope Foundation, which is looking to expand its programs to other hospitals in the area.

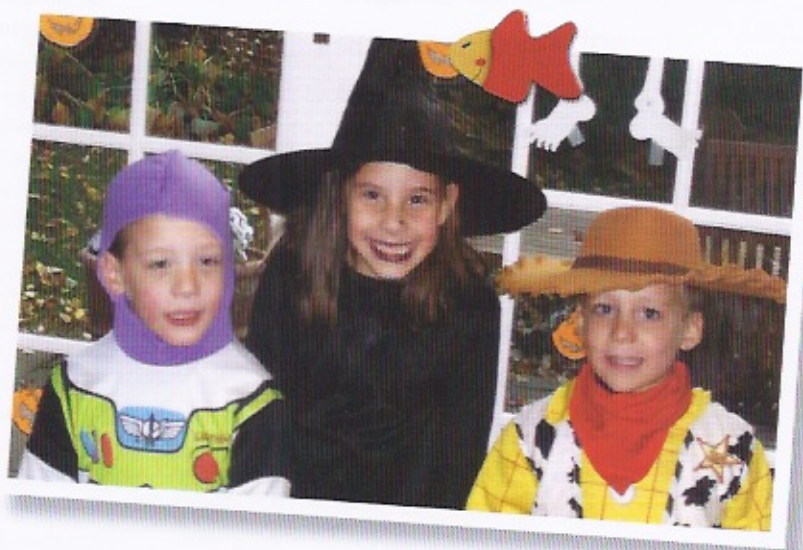
"The idea with the foundation is to pay it forward — to give back for all of the support we received," Sue says. "Now we want to be there for NICU families and make their difficult path easier to walk." ■

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—Debra Randazzo '92



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Jake, Alence and Kaden Zion at Halloween.