

Editor's Note:

- An award presentation for Dr. Aryan Azimi-Zonooz will be held Wednesday, Sept. 9, from 2-3 p.m. at St. Charles Bend, in conference rooms A & B.
- An award presentation for Joann Thorpe, RNC, will be held on Thursday, September 17, at Dignity Health's Mercy Medical Center Redding, in Redding, CA.

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Mead Johnson Nutrition and Hand to Hold Announce Third Annual NICU Heroes Award Winners**Neonatologist Aryan Azimi-Zonooz and RNC Joann Thorpe Honored for Care of Premature and Medically Fragile Infants**

GLENVIEW, Ill.— September 8, 2015 — Neonatologist Aryan Azimi-Zonooz, M.D., from St. Charles Health System in Bend, Ore., and neonatal nurse Joann Thorpe, RNC, from Dignity Health's Mercy Medical Center Redding in Redding, Calif., were named the 2015 NICU Heroes Award winners by Hand to Hold, a national nonprofit Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) parent support organization and Mead Johnson Nutrition. The awards recognize the outstanding care and support these professionals provide premature and critically ill infants and their families.

Families from 21 U.S. states nominated neonatal nurses, physicians, and other healthcare professionals who helped make a difference for their preterm or medically fragile newborns.

Each honoree will be recognized at a NICU Heroes Award ceremony at his and her respective hospitals, receiving a trophy, certificate, and a \$2,500 donation in their name to the pediatric healthcare charity of their choice. Dr. Azimi-Zonooz's gift will be donated to Ronald McDonald House Charities of Central Oregon. Thorpe's donation will be given to Mercy Foundation North to purchase two hospital-grade rocker beds that will be used to soothe drug-exposed neonates. Additionally, each hospital will receive a one-year subscription to Hand to Hold's NICU Resource Library, which provides educational materials parents can use during their child's NICU stay.

"As a NICU parent of two preemies, I know firsthand how scary it is to have a baby born early and how it affects the entire family. Having a compassionate healthcare provider who is focused not only on a baby's health but also the health of the whole family can make a life-changing difference," said Kelli Kelley, founder and executive director of Hand to Hold. The compassionate care Kelley received, and has also witnessed medical professionals give other parents, is the driving force behind creating the annual NICU Heroes Award.

Dr. Azimi-Zonooz and Thorpe were chosen by an independent panel of NICU health care professionals and NICU parents from around the country. All nominees receive a copy of the nominating family's essay, which shares the heartwarming difference their work made for their child or children and family.

Dr. Azimi-Zonooz was nominated by Jill Leonard from Bend, Ore. Leonard met Dr. Azimi-Zonooz when her son Aviv was born in November 2014 at 37-1/2 weeks and 7.8 lbs. Soon after birth, he was struggling to breathe and was diagnosed with pneumonia accompanied by a pneumothorax (collapsed lung) in both lungs. Leonard describes seeing her son in a hospital room that seemed like "ground control at NASA, with all the machines and numbers lit up and beeping." Over the next few days, she noticed Dr. Azimi-Zonooz's clean shaven face grow into a beard, as he led Aviv's care and his recovery.

"We will always have a blue candle lit on our son's birthday cakes through the years that will represent Dr. Azimi-Zonooz and all the medical staff that worked so diligently to allow our son to have birthdays. The blue candle will be scrub-colored blue, just as Dr. Azimi and the NICU staff wore. We want to recognize all these amazing NICU staff, but Dr. Azimi will always remain our family hero," she says.

"Each family we care for in the NICU brings a complex dynamic of medical challenges and emotions," says Dr. Azimi-Zonooz. "I work as part of a team of many unsung heroes in the NICU that come together to care for the infants and support the parents through the stresses of the NICU. On behalf of our entire NICU team, I accept this honor and the recognition of our work.

"I have had a long-standing interest in the development of the human brain, and the field of neonatology affords an unmatched opportunity to watch the newborn brain transform, mature and achieve its full yet nascent potential," he adds. "I could not imagine any other field of medicine more fulfilling than to be a part of a team that espouses and nurtures this mission."

Joann Thorpe, RNC, was nominated by Chelsea Arledge from Redding, California. In July 2008, Chelsea Arledge went into labor at 23 weeks and 2 days into her pregnancy while her husband was on military duty in Iraq. Thorpe held Chelsea's hand in the delivery room, knowing that she'd soon be Chelsea's NICU nurse. "Joann held my hand, comforting me," said Arledge. "She promised me they'd do everything they could to save my tiny baby — no one else said that to me. While everyone else was full of gloom and doom, Joann gave me hope and I immediately trusted her." Travis was 1 lb. 3.5 oz. when he was born, and spent the first eight days of his life under Joann's care. He was 44 days old before his mother held him.

Travis was a very sick baby and Joann let Chelsea and her husband know that their unexpected NICU journey would be one of the hardest they would ever experience, and they needed to love and support one another through it. She told them to stay strong and united as a team. "The first day Travis was in the NICU was one of the most traumatic of our 142 long NICU days. Joann stayed hours past when she was supposed to go home. Her dedication was unwavering," said Arledge.

Travis now attends a mainstream school. He graduated from speech therapy last year. And, although he is little, he is a healthy, happy and vibrant kid who plays soccer.

“As I heal from the emotional wounds I faced during our time in the NICU, I have chosen to pursue a career in nursing. Whenever I think about what kind of nurse I want to be, I think of Joann. It is my hope that one day as a nurse I will make as big of an impact on someone else’s life as Joann has on mine,” Arledge concludes.

Thorpe has worked in the NICU for 26 years, but her NICU experience started 30 years ago when her own daughter was born and admitted to the NICU. She knows first-hand that fear can turn into joy when a baby becomes healthy enough to be discharged from the NICU. This life experience led her to become a NICU nurse who is now helping others.

“Spending time in the NICU can be the biggest crisis of a family’s life,” says Thorpe. “I was so terrified when my own daughter was in the NICU, and that’s why I approach neonatal nursing as taking care of the entire family. I’m humbled and honored to be one of this year’s winners, and I can’t stop smiling.”

Mead Johnson Nutrition partnered with Hand to Hold to create the NICU Heroes Awards to reward the experience, professionalism, support and deep compassion these NICU health care professionals give their patients and their families.

“We are honored to recognize the talented NICU healthcare professionals who achieve heroic feats every day in helping to care for the most fragile infant population and their families,” said Graciela Monteagudo, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Americas and Global Marketing, Mead Johnson Nutrition. “As a leading company focused solely on pediatric nutrition, Mead Johnson Nutrition is committed to nourishing the world’s children for the best start in life. Our partnership with Hand to Hold is one way that we demonstrate our appreciation of the skill and dedication shown by NICU professionals as they face medically challenging and sometimes life threatening situations.”

About Mead Johnson Nutrition *Mead Johnson, a global leader in pediatric nutrition, develops, manufactures, markets and distributes more than 70 products in over 50 markets worldwide. The company's mission is to nourish the world's children for the best start in life. The Mead Johnson name has been associated with science-based pediatric nutrition products for more than 100 years. The company's Enfa™ family of brands, including Enfamil® infant formula, is the world's leading brand franchise in pediatric nutrition. For more information, go to www.meadjohnson.com.*

About Hand to Hold *Hand to Hold is a community-based, national support program for parents of preemies, babies born with a special health care need and those who have experienced loss due to these or other complications. The nonprofit organization's vision is to enable a network of families to offer support, comfort and understanding to one another, and to provide them with knowledge, information and resources to ensure the best outcome for their children and family. For more information, go to www.handtohold.org.*