

Media statement

From: Bill Lane, Senior Media and Communications Advisor, Mercy Health

Date: Thursday 15 December 2022

Giving back to NICU – that’s Maddie’s mantra

It’s seven years since Maddie Francis embarked on a journey to shine a light on the great work of staff at the Mercy Hospital for Women (MHW) Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and not even a three-year pandemic has held her back.

In 2016, Maddie’s son Ashton was born at 30 weeks’ gestation and spent 10 weeks in NICU.

Ashton has grown into a happy and healthy child but still has regular specialist appointments to cope with some developmental issues. He attends a school for children with autism.

Not long after Ashton’s birth, Maddie founded NICU Cheer, which collects donated gifts from corporate Australia to share among NICU families and staff.

Along the way, she has recruited other NICU mums to support the cause.

“The pandemic and restrictions have caused some challenges for me but they are nothing compared with what NICU babies and their parents are confronting,” Maddie says.

Each year, Maddie writes a heartfelt letter to all families receiving the gift bags. This year’s letter reads:

“We’ve been where you are and we know it’s not the start to life you dreamed of for your precious baby. The NICU is hard, whether you’ve been there for two days or 200 days, so we hope this gift bag cheers you up and reminds you that you are not alone on this journey.”

Like many mothers whose babies receive neonatal intensive care, Maddie is passionate about the unit and the staff.

Maddie says she admires all the MHW NICU staff but a particular hero is one of Mercy Health’s Neonatal consultant Dr Gillian Opie “who is a huge reason why we initiated NICU Cheer”.

“Without Dr Opie, we wouldn’t have Ashton — she’s our greatest supporter. We couldn’t love her more,” Maddie says.

In 2019, NICU Cheer grew to incorporate two other annual milestones: Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. The organisation also delivers gifts to Melbourne’s other four NICUs.

Last Saturday, 30 mothers gathered at Maddie’s home to pack up more than 300 gift bags.

“It looks as though restrictions are back in place but I’m happy just knowing that families, who are feeling anxious over Christmas, will receive some festive cheer,” Maddie says.

Staff working on Christmas Day are not forgotten either — Maddie has dropped off hampers for those on call.

Her hard work continues to pay off. Donations to NICU Cheer come from as far afield as Italy, USA, New Zealand and from all around Australia.

(ENDS)