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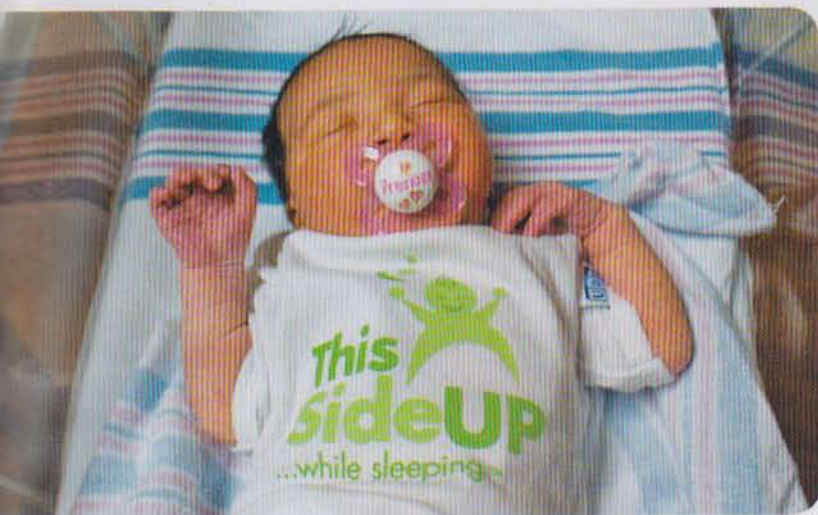
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HEALTH

A Baby's Safe Slumber

Local SIDS-awareness campaign expands to California, Florida • By Jack Cooksey

Vince Ferraro was only 3 months, 1 week and 1 day old when he died suddenly in December 1999.

To his parents' knowledge, he was a healthy baby — no sickness, no complications. But while under a babysitter's care, Vince died in his sleep, becoming another soul-wrenching occurrence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS.

As the name suggests, SIDS comes without any warning, a cruel reality that leaves parents like Sara and Mark Ferraro, Vince's mom and dad, reeling without any easy answers. "After he passed away, we were in a daze," Mark says.

Of all the things that can threaten an infant's life, SIDS is probably the most confounding. It's still a medical mystery as to what exactly causes SIDS infants to stop breathing, and because of that fact, Mark explains, it's incorrect to say that one can "prevent" SIDS. It is possible only to reduce the risk, he says.

Research points to several risk factors for SIDS, such as putting an infant to sleep facedown in a crib, smoking near a baby, leaving toys in the crib at bedtime and allowing a baby to get overheated. (For a complete list of risk factors, visit thissideupcampaign.org.)

Having suffered the same tragedy in 2002 when her 4 1/2-month-old son died of SIDS, Richmonder Kyra Oliver started the Hayes Hitzeman Foundation in his name. The foundation's mission is to spread awareness and knowledge of SIDS. What soon resulted was the "This Side Up" campaign, featuring a onesie garment that Oliver created for newborns. It has clear instructions printed on the front: "This Side Up ... while sleeping."

In March 2006, Oliver began distributing the onesies to hospitals in Vir- ➤

EXOTIC ANIMALS BREED HOPE

Hanover resident Curtis Shepperson says he never planned to have a full-blown exotic-animal farm — it started as a hobby, with just a handful of geese for his wife, Bea, to enjoy on their pond.

"Then my wife wanted a deer to bottle-feed, then I wanted something, and my daughter wanted something, and my son wanted something," Shepperson says. The family's collection grew into Windy Oaks Animal Farm, with about 125 animals, including lemurs, zebras, kangaroos and camels.

In 2004, Shepperson's longtime hobby went public after he found out that his grandson, Skyler, now 7, had been diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a form of cancer that most commonly develops in the nervous system of children under the age of 10. Shepperson created Skyler's Day of Hope, an invitation to the public to enjoy the animals at Windy Oaks. The event raised funds so Skyler could continue his cancer treatments. After a second malignant tumor was discovered under Skyler's skull, the fundraiser became an annual affair.

This year's event will be held on June 6 from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 8207 Bultaco Trail in Mechanicsville. Tickets (\$10) are sold at the gate the day of the event. For more information, call 405-2061.

Curtis Shepperson holds an annual fundraiser at his exotic-animal farm for his grandson Skyler, who's battling cancer.

—Bethany Emerson



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ginia and Tennessee (her home state); since then, the campaign has dressed more than 50,000 newborns in the onesies throughout more than 20 health organizations and hospitals, including CJW Medical Center and VCU Medical Center.

"We know that there are about 2,500 SIDS deaths in the United States each year," Oliver says, "and I want to reduce that."

In late April, she announced that her non-profit would partner with The Raise Foundation, a child-abuse prevention agency, as the sole distributor of "This Side Up" onesies in Orange County, Calif. The agency plans to start with an initial order of 5,000 onesies.

And this month, Oliver launched another partnership with the Health Council of East Central Florida in Oviedo, Fla., which plans to distribute about 15,000 of the onesies per quarter.

Sharon McCoy, the director of women's services at CJW Medical Center, says her hospital uses the onesies as a tangible reminder of SIDS risks.

But most new parents have been educated about SIDS, McCoy notes. "Who is often not educated are the grandparents, relatives and babysitters," she says.

In addition to the onesie campaign, the Hayes Foundation raises money to support research, and so far, the group has taken in more than \$500,000.

Other local and statewide efforts, such as the Virginia SIDS Alliance, also raise money for research and education, while providing support groups for families, friends and relatives who have lost an infant to the mysterious syndrome.

Mark Ferraro, who is director of purchasing for Bon Secours, serves as vice president of the alliance. He and Sara, who live in Henrico County, now have two children — a son, Victor, 8, and a daughter, Marley, 5.

Ferraro says he and Sara were well aware of SIDS before they had Vince. And the day that Vince died at his babysitter's, he was even sleeping on his back, as recommended. "Our initial reaction was, 'We did everything right. So how could this happen?'"

Today, the Ferraros help educate anyone they can. "We need everyone to have the same message," he says, adding, "You never know who the mom is going to listen to." ■