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Envisioning a World without SIDS

Richmond woman takes 'This Side Up' campaign national

by Sean Ryan



Kyra Oliver and her young friend demonstrate the correct way for an infant to lie. (Photo by Todd Wright)

One phone call forever changed the life of Kyra Oliver.

On June 11, 2002, the young mother picked up the phone only to hear that her son Hayes had stopped breathing.

"It was the most terrifying phone call of my life," Kyra remembers. "To hear that Hayes was no longer breathing, then to see him at the hospital, lying there with no signs of life—it's a memory that will be with me forever."

After just 4½ months with her infant, Kyra lost Hayes to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). In the days following his death, she started the Hayes Foundation (www.hayesfoundation.org) in honor of the son she was just getting to know—and to ultimately contribute to a future in which no parent loses a baby to SIDS.

Also known as crib death, SIDS is the sudden and unexplained death of an infant under one year of age and is the cause of death for about 2,500 American babies each year—the No. 1 cause of death of infants up to one year of age. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), most SIDS deaths occur when a baby is between one and four months old. Generally, SIDS affects more boys than girls, and most deaths occur during the fall, winter and early spring months.

Seven years ago, Kyra remembers not even wanting to broach the subject of SIDS when she was a new mother. These days, she is starting the conversation.

The Hayes Foundation started the This Side Up campaign (www.thissideupcampaign.org) in 2006 to remind caregivers that babies are safest from the risk of SIDS if placed to sleep on their backs. The campaign distributes onesies

that read "This Side Up...While Sleeping" on the front and feature other tips to reduce the risk of SIDS on the back.

"All of us are responsible for educating each other—parents, grandparents, daycare providers, relatives, babysitters, everyone," Kyra says. "A simple conversation about 'This Side Up' can help save a baby's life, save a parent's nightmare. The onesies serve as a tangible reminder, a conversation starter, a way for people to talk and be educated about an uncomfortable subject."

The campaign partnered with HCA's CJW Medical Center, VCU Health System, Owens & Minor and Virginia Hospital Laundry to launch the campaign in hospitals in Richmond and around the state.

"At Johnston-Willis Hospital, we put the onesies on all our babies after their first bath," says Sharon McCoy, director of women's services at CJW Medical Center's Johnston-Willis Campus. "It's a great teaching tool rather than handing someone a piece of paper to read. It's in their face. When grandparents or other visitors are holding the baby, they're looking at the onesie and reading about safe sleeping."

Adds Maria Curran, the vice president of human resources at VCU Health System: "We clearly felt the campaign would take off and quickly have an impact on the SIDS rates locally, but we also saw the potential to have a significant impact across the region.... If a nurse brings a baby to its mother in this onesie, it is an educational opportunity for the medical staff, residents, students and the family."

A partnership with Ukrop's Supermarkets Inc, Ukrop's Dress Express, Pampers and the Smart Beginnings initiative led to the onesies being distributed in the New Parent Kits sent to new parents by Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's office. And several hospitals in Kyra's native Tennessee also distribute the onesies.

Earlier this year, the This Side Up campaign launched in Orange County, Calif., with plans to start in surrounding counties soon. And former Tampa Bay Buccaneers kicker Matt Bryant—whose son Tryson died of SIDS last year—helped kick off the campaign in Orange County, Florida.

By year's end, it's expected the campaign will have touched 100,000 families in Virginia, Tennessee, California, Florida and Texas.

"We're anxious for the This Side Up campaign to spread on a national level," Kyra Oliver says. "It is our responsibility as parents and adults to educate ourselves. Hayes came into this world to make us aware." ▼

Sean Ryan has gotten to know Kyra Oliver while working with her organization at Hodges Partnership, and has great admiration for the work that she's done.