After a whirlwind 24-hour illness, an ambulance ride, and an emergency c-section, Catherine was born at 25 weeks due to severe preeclampsia. She weighed just 1 lb. 5 oz. Our first week in the NICU was a blur. Worrying about our very sick child, dealing with my own recovery, and adjusting to life in what seemed like a totally foreign place was very overwhelming.

A week after her birth, her father and I anxiously awaited the results of her cranial sector scan (an ultrasound of her brain). When we asked the resident that evening for the results, we were completely unprepared to hear that Catherine had a grade IV bleed in the left side of her brain. That diagnosis was devastating. Not only were we worrying about keeping her alive from day to day, but also about the potential of very serious long-term consequences. It was very difficult to put those long-term fears aside and focus on taking each day at a time.

As our journey continued Catherine had surgery for a PDA and later for retinopathy of prematurity. She also struggled with breathing and eating. There were many challenging times, but many wonderful times too. We celebrated milestones that were special to our journey—the first time she opened her eyes, the first time we heard her cry, the first time we got to hold her, our first time kangarooing, her first outfit, her move to an open crib, her due date, and many others. We also talked with her about the many things she would do when she came home. Thinking about all the fun, everyday things we would eventually get to do gave me something to look forward to.

Catherine came home after 132 days in the NICU, a little less than a month after her due date. We got to do all of the things I promised we would do when she came home.

Now she is a happy, healthy three-year-old who does so many of the things we worried she might not be able to do. We are so proud of her and how far she has come! She loves animals, playing outside, going to preschool, and reading books.

From her earliest days in the NICU I sat at her bedside and read to her. I struggled with how to take care of this tiny little person who I wasn’t even allowed to hold, but I hoped that the sounds of my voice would bring her comfort and make her feel loved. At three reading is still one of our favorite things to do together. Sometimes we will read one of the books I read to her in the NICU and I can’t help but feel so much gratitude that the very small, very sick baby I once read to in her isolette is now a happy, healthy little person who brings us so much joy. ♥
Back to School for NICU Grads!
It seems like just yesterday these big kids were the little ones in the CHKD NICU. Look at them now!

**GREYSON** 36 weeker, now 6  
First Grade

**CHARLIE** 30 weeker, now 8.  
Second Grade

**JOEY** 36 weeker, now 6  
First Grade

**CORWIN** 27 weeker, now 4  
Pre-K

**ABBY** 24 weeker, now 8  
Kindergarten

**MILAN** Born with Trisomy 18 and Congenital Heart Disease, now 6.  
First Grade

**ANTONIO** 29 weeker, now 3  
Pre-K3

**ZACHARY** 39 weeker, now 7  
Second Grade

**GABRIELLA** 37 weeker, now 6  
First Grade
Who’s Who in the NICU?

MEET NURSE LAUREN JEFFERSON

How long have you been working in the NICU?
I have worked in the NICU for a little over six years. I spent four years working as a care partner, and two as a nurse.

What made you decide to go into neonatal nursing?
I really wasn’t sure what kind of nursing I wanted to do before becoming a CNA. My grandmother worked in the hospital and suggested I try the NICU. After working as a care partner I knew that the NICU was where I wanted to spend my career as a nurse. Being able to spend time and help the nurses with patient care was a good foundation for me to build from, and it pushed me even harder to reach my goal, NICU nursing.

What do you find most rewarding about your job?
There are so many things. Of course when the babies get to go home it’s rewarding, but I think all of the small things in between make it so special. Anything from a baby smiling or to maybe finally reaching the goal weight to wear clothes. I love watching not only the babies grow, but the parents too. What seems foreign slowly becomes easier every day.

What advice do you have for the family members of NICU babies?
My best advice would be to participate in your baby’s care as much as possible when you visit, as much as their medical status allows. Whether it’s changing their diaper, or doing oral care, it all counts. Don’t be afraid to speak up. Participating in medical rounds if you are able to be here is a great way to be involved in your baby’s plan of care and stay in touch with your baby’s doctors and nurse practitioners. I know that rounds and updates can be scary or intimidating sometimes, but you know your baby best. Also, participate in classes and support groups when you can.

What do you like to do when you are not at work?
When I am not at work I enjoy spending time with my friends and family, taking boat trips to new places, and I love shopping for old furniture to refinish. Mostly my life revolves around my furry children, Trigger and Copper; they love trips to Home Depot or Lowes for whatever crazy project I am trying to do.

What is an interesting fact that most NICU parents don’t know about you?
My grandmother was a NICU nurse here for 27 years! Also, I had 2 surgeries here at CHKD in 2002/2003 for scoliosis by surgeons that work with our NICU babies sometimes.

ISAAC 27 weeker, now 2
Preschool

GUS 26 weeker, now 3
Pre-K3

HAYDEN 30 weeker, now 6
First Grade
Going back to work while my son was in the NICU was extremely difficult, but I believe it was ultimately the right decision. My wife and her mom stayed by my son’s side every day he was in the NICU. I visited before work while he was still sleeping to get an update on labs and the schedule for the day and would return in the evenings after work to play, read to him, change some diapers, and to get him ready for bed. Even though I wanted to meet every nurse, every doctor, and every other person interacting with my son during the day, I knew he was in good hands, especially with his Mom and Grandma. My limited time off was much more useful and enjoyable when he was released from the NICU after 6 weeks.” -Chris, dad of Taylor

“I did not take traditional FMLA, but instead only took a week off from work during the week my wife had our daughter. Olivia was in the NICU for approximately four months. I recall making calls to the NICU pod from my office during my breaks to get updates on Olivia’s progress; I often did this as a way to not overwhelm my wife with questions about Olivia’s care and progress. To avoid burnout, because my time was basically split between work and the NICU, I would take 20-30 minutes in the break room to nap and pray for my family and myself. When I returned to work, I had rehearsed updates for colleagues who wanted to see pictures because I was not fully comfortable disclosing certain things or showing pictures of her in the incubator surrounded by monitors and tubes. Lastly, I cannot over stress how important it is for fathers to be involved in the care of the baby (i.e., changing the baby, bathing the baby, swaddling the baby, feeding baby, etc.). Involvement will give you something to look forward to after work and the memories will comfort you at work. Additionally, the involvement deepens the family bond among all individuals and provides a solid and healthy foundation for life at home.” -Andrew, dad of Olivia

“Prior to returning to work, I spoke with my supervisor about adjusting my schedule to work partial days from 7-12. They were able to accommodate my request and I worked an adjusted schedule for 1 1/2 months. This took away some of the guilt I felt about going back to work. I was able to maintain my nursing schedule and receive updates from his primary nurses.” -Latrice, mom of Antonio

“I worked but only 2 days a week. Working part-time was a great compromise. I found an amazing primary nurse and trusted her with my son. We set up times that would (hopefully) be good to call for both me and the nurse so I could check in every few hours. She made sure the doctors called me for rounds. If you work with the staff, you can make it work. And I let my employer know the situation. I think the majority of human beings will be understanding to an extent.” -Leah, mom of Greyson

“Being in the Navy while my son was in the NICU was stressful enough, but being stationed in Japan was even more devastating, as I was 14 hours ahead and half-way around the world. All communication was mainly via email except for the times I was able to use the phone for a short call or short video chat providing the signal was strong enough to maintain a connection. When I was finally sent home to be with my family during this difficult time, I still had to report to work on shore duty, so it was work, NICU, then home and repeat. During the time in the NICU, Corwin’s mother fell ill and had to be hospitalized for nine days, so I was alone to care for not only a sick baby, but also the mother of my child, whom I almost lost. Octavia and I pretty much put our romantic relationship on hold because we had to put our son first and make sure that we were there for him. I look back now and see that there were a lot of sacrifices that were made but we got through it and I’m thankful for my family and CHKD.” -Corey, dad of Corwin