



Local News

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Photographs help parents heal, honor lost infants



Rob and Nina Buttermore hold a family portrait Feb. 18 at their Waterford home. After their daughter Auddie was stillborn, the Buttermores took advantage of the free professional photography services for parents who have suffered that loss offered by the nonprofit Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep. The portrait was taken by local photographer and volunteer Brenda De Los Santos. (Tim Cook/The Day)

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About six weeks after Auddie Lynne Buttermore was stillborn, her mother worried that she was losing the few memories she had of her first child.

"I felt like I was starting to forget her," Nina Buttermore, 30, said of the infant she carried for 39 weeks, a child who had appeared healthy until her mother's final two pushes in the labor and delivery room at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital in New London last May.

But while still in the hospital, immediately after the tragedy, the Buttermores had decided to allow professional photographer **Brenda De Los Santos** of the international organization **Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep** to photograph them with Auddie.

"I realized, I can't remember her smell. I can't remember the feel of her tiny little hands anymore. And then I looked through the pictures and it brought back the scent, and the feel," she recalled.

"It wasn't immediate, but it was later on, after a few weeks, six months, when life goes back to normal, when the condolence cards stop coming and people go back to their routines, that's when those photographs helped. I can look at them and remember," said the Waterford resident who works as a speech and language pathologist for Groton Public Schools.

Nina's husband and Auddie's father, Rob Buttermore, said he also finds solace in the photographs.

"Our memories are so fickle and limited," he said, adding that without the photographs of Auddie, it would be difficult to remember little things like "her wisps of hair and tiny toenails."



The couple, who is pregnant again and expects to deliver in August, said that last spring, when labor and delivery staff at L+M told them about Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep and the free portraits of deceased newborns it offers to parents who have just experienced the loss, they had different reactions to the idea of allowing a stranger into their hospital room at such a deeply emotional, sad and private time.

Nina had just delivered Auddie, whose heart was beating until the very final stages of childbirth. Despite a team of medical staff working to get her to breathe, about 30 minutes after her birth at 9:23 a.m. on May 23, the couple was told she was stillborn.

"I kept thinking in my mind, she's going to make it," Nina said, describing Auddie as "7 pounds, 8 ounces, with chubby cheeks, red peach fuzz and my lips."

Later, when a nurse provided information about the group and its services, Nina was immediately interested.

"I was all for it," she said, while Rob, who had his own camera and had been taking lots of photographs prior to the birth, was less enthusiastic.

Today, the Buttermores have no regrets about taking advantage of the professional photography services. They didn't know then that when De Los Santos arrived to take the photographs of Auddie, it was her first time volunteering for the organization.

"The thought of going into, walking into a hospital room, at probably the worst time in a family's life, it's emotional and heartbreaking and not something that most people would jump at the chance to do," said De Los Santos, who lives in the city and is a graduate of New London High School and Boston University.

She signed up as a volunteer for Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep at the urging of her sister, Angela Donovan, who is a labor and delivery nurse at L+M.

"My sister and I are very close, and she came home one day really upset because a patient she had cared for found out very late in her pregnancy that her baby had no heartbeat, and this was the first time she was dealing with a patient in those circumstances ... and she told me, 'The hospital has a little point and shoot camera that they take pictures with, but it's nothing like what a professional photographer would do. I wish we could do more.'"

De Los Santos had applied in March, was accepted as a volunteer several weeks later and did her first job, for the Buttermores, in May.

"For parents who go into the hospital and leave without their baby, you have to imagine putting yourself in those circumstances," she said. "There's a really high level of shock that you are experiencing, and I imagine that it would be very difficult to even remember tiny details in that situation.

"You may leave the hospital and, even a week later, you can't remember what your baby looked like, what their sweet hands looked like, or their eyelashes, and having professional photography, professional photographs taken, helps with that."

'She was beautiful'

Jarell Roberts of Norwich, whose wife, Ryan, delivered their stillborn daughter, Amorie Skye, on Jan. 9 at L+M, said the photographs that De Los Santos took of their baby have helped with his grieving.

Everything was fine for the Roberts for 28 weeks. Then one morning, Ryan Roberts didn't feel her baby moving and went to an emergency room in another part of the state where she was working to be checked. The baby's heartbeat couldn't be detected and she was advised to go to L+M where she had been planning to deliver. That was Jan. 6. Three days later, her baby was stillborn.

Originally from Florida, Jarell Roberts said he welcomed the services of De Los Santos so he could share quality photographs of his first child with family members who are not in the area.

"She was beautiful. She looked just like my wife but had my nose and a full head of hair ... I would have felt I was missing out on an opportunity not having taken those photos as a family," he said. "Grieving would be harder without a portrait to hang in our house."

De Los Santos is now the area coordinator for Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep and has recruited a second volunteer photographer, Krista Verito of Oakdale, and two assistants to help with photo shoots at both L+M and at The William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich.

The remembrance photography organization was founded in 2005 when a Colorado couple, Mike and Cheryl Haggard, decided to call in a professional photographer to take black and white portraits of them holding their sickly 6-day-old son, Maddux Achilles Haggard, before and after he was taken off life support. Those photographs inspired the Haggards and the photographer, Sandy Puc, to launch the nonprofit that has provided thousands of families of babies who are stillborn or are at risk of dying as newborns with free professional portraits with their baby.

Today, more than 1,700 photographers around the world volunteer for the group. After a session, families receive an email link where they can download their photographs and a release that allows them to use the photos as they desire. When a family doesn't have email or access to a computer, they can request a CD instead.

All the photographs are black and white or sepia tone, and on average, a family receives 15 to 25 images.

Katie Van Dyke, the nurse manager of labor and delivery, pediatrics and the neonatal intensive-care unit at L+M, said it is "a wonderful program."

"The opportunity to have this photograph of your baby at such a tragic time is priceless," she said.

Receiving professional photographs helps the family to validate that they have had a baby, she said.

"They love that baby, they just can't take that baby home," Van Dyke said, adding that typically, friends, family and co-workers are unsure how to react to the sad news.

"When there is a miscarriage or a stillbirth, people don't want to talk about it. Oftentimes they either say the wrong thing or worse, nothing at all. But these families, they were preparing for this birth. They had dreams and hopes for the future, all the things that people dream about when they're having children. ... And the hardest thing is when they go out the door and they're not taking a baby with them."

The photographs and the compassion shown by De Los Santos helps, Van Dyke said.

"She was very kind and she offered her condolences and you could see how hard it was for her. You could see it on her face how bad she felt," said Jarell Roberts, of his family's session with De Los Santos. "But then when we got those photos later ... it was wonderful.

"I have no regrets," he said. "It's one of the things that we wouldn't have had, and as somebody who lost their first child, I can tell you that without the photos, grieving would be hard."

The Buttermores have a gallery of the photographs of Auddie displayed in their living room.

"If we had just ignored what had happened and moved on, that would have been disrespectful," Rob Buttermore said. "These photos are a reminder."

Olivia Pearce, a labor and delivery nurse at L+M who has a healthy 2-year-old but suffered a miscarriage last summer, said the photographs help validate the loss.

"Infant loss and pregnancy loss is a loss that people don't like to think about, or talk about," Pearce said. "... But one in four women have had a loss, and that is a huge number, and talking about it is OK and lets those women going through this know they are not alone."

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For information about Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep visit their website at

www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/ or search for them on Facebook. To find Brenda De Los Santos visit her website at

www.brendadelossantos.com.

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