

# Locals vow to continue long fight against premature births

BY LAYLA FARMER  
THE CHRONICLE

Just over four years ago, Rev. Drew Southern and his wife Jamie were excitedly awaiting parenthood. After years of trying, the couple was expecting triplets.

But tragedy struck on July 30, 2007, when the babies were delivered at just 25 weeks – nearly four months too soon. One of the triplets, Adam Southern, passed away just 12 hours after his delivery, but William and Lindy Southern, Adam's brother and sister, survived. It was a harrowing time for the Southern family as they mourned the loss of their tiny son and prayed for the survival of their other two children, both of whom would spend months in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

"It was awful," said Rev. Southern, pastor of Faith United Methodist Church in Rural Hall. "These are our first and only children and you typically think of that as the happiest moment of your life, but that's not what it was at all for us, because they were born so early."

Leaders from the local March of Dimes chapter gathered at Corpening Plaza Tuesday morning, in hopes of bringing awareness to the issue of premature births – which disproportionately affects blacks –



From left: Mayor Allen Joines, Dr. Marty Scott, Ann Smith, Dr. Cherrie Welch and Tanner Robinson cut the ribbon across Corpening Plaza's entrance to officially kickoff the month.

and preventing tragedies like the one the Southern family endured. Organizers joined forces with representatives from local medical centers in the event to officially kickoff national Prematurity Awareness Month, observed in November each year.

At more than 12 percent, North Carolina's rate of premature births – deliveries that take place before 37 weeks of gestation – is among the highest in the nation.

"On any given day, there are over 100 babies in the nurseries in the Triad struggling for their lives, and some of them weigh less than a

pound," said Dr. Cherrie Welch, director of Brenner Children's Hospital Nurseries. "...Some of these babies die before they're ever able to go home with their families."

Welch, a neonatologist for the last decade, is the incoming board chair for the March of Dimes.

"I see the tragedy of premature births every single day at work and it's just heartbreaking," she said of her motivation to take on a leadership role with the organization.

Premature births can cause myriad health complications, including cerebral palsy, vision or hearing loss

and intellectual disabilities.

While most premature births are caused by conditions that can't be prevented, many women choose to deliver prematurely for a variety of non-medical reasons, Welch said. She believes these women are unaware of the risks these early deliveries present.

"Lots of people think that at 37 weeks (of gestation), your baby should be able to be born healthy, but actually that last two weeks is important to development and growth," Welch explained. "...It's just not good for the baby (to be delivered early). Sometimes, they'll die."

Forsyth Medical Center has taken some big steps to reduce the number of premature births, such as prohibiting elective deliveries before 39 weeks unless the mother or baby is in danger, said Ann Smith, director of Forsyth Medical Center's Sara Lee Center for Women's Health.

The medical center is also working to promote breast feeding, which is beneficial for all babies, but can be life savings for premature infants, Smith explained. Two years ago, the hospital started a breast milk donor program to provide for premature babies who didn't have access to it

otherwise.

"They get the immunities from their moms and have much less risk of infections," explained the University of Florida alumna. "The more breast milk that they receive, the better the outcome. We started our donor breast milk program and we decreased out gut infections (in NICU infants) by 50 percent, just in the first year."



Rev. Southern

The Southern family is among the staunch supporters the local March of Dimes chapters depends on each year to help raise funds for research and education. They even served as the organization's ambassador family during the 2010 March for Babies fundraiser walk.

"We've been very involved with March of Dimes since our kids were born," Rev. Southern related. "It is a cause that we do believe in. We've experienced the pain and trauma that can occur when kids are born very prematurely, and the goal of the March of Dimes we believe is a worthy goal for families, for communities."

For more information about the March of Dimes, visit [www.marchofdimes.com](http://www.marchofdimes.com).

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