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Hand to Hold Honors Four Medical Professionals for Strong, Compassionate Care of Premature Babies and Their Families on February 13

AUSTIN, TEXAS – February 9, 2014 — Hand to Hold, a nonprofit that supports parents of preemies and babies who spend time in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU or “nick-you”), will recognize the efforts and accomplishments of four local healthcare providers at its 2014 “For the Love of Babies” Awards Breakfast on Thursday, February 13, 2014 at 7:30 a.m. at the Renaissance Austin Hotel, 9721 Arboretum Blvd., Austin. Hand to Hold’s 2014 honorees represent the fields of obstetrics, neonatology, pediatrics and social work and include:

- Nancy Sheppard, LCSW, Seton Healthcare Network
- Dr. Christopher Seeker, Austin Area OBGYN
- Dr. Audelio “Sonny” Rivera, St. David’s HealthCare
- Dr. Kelly Thorstad, Lone Star Pediatrics

Hand to Hold founder Kelli Kelley says that families of preemies and babies born with special health needs are overwhelmed by their need for information and support while a baby is in the NICU. “We created For the Love of Babies to recognize and applaud the experience, professionalism and deep compassion that these men and women give to their patients and families,” Kelley adds. “Ms. Sheppard and doctors Seeker, Rivera and Thorstad provide exemplary care for families facing extraordinarily stressful experiences. They are critical partners not only in the care of the baby, but the entire family.”

One in ten babies born has medical needs at birth that are so serious that they need intensive care in neonatal intensive care units (NICU). In 2013, one out of every eight babies born in Austin, Texas, arrived before reaching 37 weeks gestation (known as full-term). Advancements in neonatal care continue to improve outcomes for these babies, but their parents rely on a network of providers and peers to receive support, information and ongoing education, which helps ensure the best outcome for the baby and the entire family.

The 2014 For the Love of Babies honorees represent the spectrum of care supporting a family and their baby during pregnancy to delivery, hospital care and home. A beloved and well-known Austin physician, honoree Christopher Seeker, M.D. has been providing OB/GYN care to women in Austin since 1988 and continues today. He is joined by Dr. Sonny Rivera, neonatologist and medical director of neonatal intensive care unit at St. David’s Medical Center. Dr. Rivera has studied extensively the unique conditions affecting premature infants, such as necrotizing enterocolitis which increases morbidity and mortality in preemies. Dedicated to finding a cure, Dr. Rivera researched donor human milk, learning the science of processing and of constituent and calorie identification and leading to the development of new feeding protocols for preemies.

Honorees also include Nancy Sheppard, LMSW, who is a liaison for patients' perinatal support between the Seton Hospital network and community agencies and professionals in Central Texas and a longtime advocate for perinatal services. As a caregiver for families at the hospital and at home, pediatrician Kelly Thorstad, M.D., of Lone Star Pediatrics is being honored for her dedication to ensuring NICU graduates and their families receive extra support.

"Dr. Thorstad took a special interest in NICU cases early in her career," says Hand to Hold board member Tara Potts, a mother of boy/girl twins who were born at 34 weeks gestation and spent three weeks in the NICU at North Austin Medical Center. "She knows that premie parents have so many questions and needs that deserve to be addressed, and she makes time in her schedule to provide the highest level of care."

"We are grateful to every honoree for his and her roles in Austin's great community of care for NICU and bereaved families," says Kelley. "It is our pleasure to honor them for all they do for the love of babies."

About Hand to Hold

Hand to Hold, a nonprofit organization serving NICU families nationwide, provides comprehensive navigation resources and support programs to parents of preemies, babies born with special health care needs and those who have experienced a loss due to these or other complications. Hand to Hold's core service is matching experienced peer mentors with new parents who have had a child in the NICU to offer support and equipping parents with education they need to care for their baby, family and themselves. Hand to Hold was the 2012 recipient of the Becky Hatfield Family Support Award, given by the National Perinatal Association. All services are offered without charge. For more information, visit www.handtohold.org or call toll-free 855-H2H-NICU.

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