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Hand to Hold Honors the Strength and Super Powers of NICU Families and their Premature Infants in 2015 Premie Power Photo and Essay Contest

Contest Names Five Winners from Florida, Kansas, South Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin

AUSTIN, Texas (December 17, 2015) – Families from 31 states shared personal and inspiring stories about how their premature and medically fragile infants continually demonstrate super hero qualities while facing a range of physical and medical challenges in Hand to Hold's [sixth annual Premie Power Photo and Essay Contest](#). Hand to Hold, a nonprofit that supports parents of preemies and babies who spend time in the neonatal intensive care unit, announced five winners ranging in age from 10 months to 6-years-old, including one-year-old quadruplets Alyssa, Carter, Miles and Bentley Sallaska, from Liberal, Kansas, who were named the "Thundering Thurston" Premies of the Year and Overall Winners for receiving the most votes in the contest. The award was named in memory of Thurston Mossholder, one of the first Premie Power honorees in 2010. The Sallaska family received the grand prize worth more than \$1,000, including a personalized Kantik block printed play quilt and \$500 BambinosBoutique.com gift certificate, an Apple iPad Mini courtesy of Huggies, Premie Power Super Hero Capes and Gloworm toy.

Alyssa, Carter, Miles and Bentley were born at 25 weeks gestation and faced many challenges including Chronic Lung Disease. Each tiny baby spent between two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half months in the NICU. Their mother, Amanda Sallaska, nicknamed them "The Mighty Quad Squad."

"I am so proud of how far each has come," said Amanda Sallaska. "There was a time that we didn't know whether they would all survive. I am so thankful that they not only survived, but continue to thrive daily. They continue to amaze all around them with their progress. They each are meeting all their adjusted milestones and have even caught up in some areas to their actual age. They are true fighters and true miracles," she says.

The entries from Florida, Kansas, South Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin, included one from the family of 1-year-old Abigail Poorman from St. Petersburg, Florida, who was recognized with the Executive Director's Award. This award is not based on number of votes, but instead is selected by Kelli Kelley, Hand to Hold Executive Director and NICU parent of two, and given to a Premie Power contestant who epitomizes a super hero's strength, courage and resilience.

“Admirable Abigail” has been flaunting her preemie powers since she was born early at 25 weeks weighing just one pound 11 ounces. After 157 days in the hospital, she came home with a feeding tube and tracheostomy to breathe. Children born before 37 weeks gestation may face a wide range of medical challenges that continue long after a child comes home from the hospital, including ongoing care from medical specialists and physical, occupational and speech therapists.

Proud mom Patricia Poorman wrote directly to her daughter as part of her Preemie Power nomination noting the super hero qualities she exhibits. “Over the past year, we together, have grown and conquered more than we could have ever hoped! Within these few months since you’ve been home, you’ve gotten rid of equipment they prepared us to have for years to come: feeding tube, oxygen and your ventilator. The milestones we celebrated were different than the average parents celebrates, but these milestones were more significant; they supported the fact of how far you have come, and how strong of a little girl you are.”

In the United States, 380,000 or about [one in ten babies](#), are born too early, before 37 weeks gestation, and others are born who require specialized care in a NICU after birth for other medical reasons. [Worldwide, 15 million babies are born too soon each year](#). Premature birth, the most prevalent reason for a NICU stay, is traumatic and a leading cause of permanent disability and death, yet many of these babies beat the odds.

“We are thrilled to encourage families with our annual Preemie Power Contest and give them the opportunity to celebrate their resilient, courageous children and all they have accomplished,” says Kelli Kelley, founder and Executive Director of Hand to Hold. “Hand to Hold’s mission to offer education and emotional support to families who have had a child in the NICU, or experienced a NICU loss, is so critical to a family healing from a challenging and traumatic journey. Research has shown that connections with peers can help parents and families weather the storm of prematurity and grief so they can better care for their medically fragile child.”

2015 Preemie Power Photo and Essay Contest Winners

- Ten-month-old Reese Costakis of Bluffton, South Carolina received top honors in the 0 to 1 year age category. “Remarkable Reese” was born at 23 weeks gestation weighing 1 pound 6 ounces and spent 97 days in the NICU.
- One-year-old quadruplets Alyssa, Carter, Miles and Bentley Sallaska of Liberal, Kansas, were the winners in the over 1 to 2 years age category and were recognized as the Thundering Thurston Premies of the Year Overall Winner. “The Mighty Quad Squad” were born at 25 weeks gestation, weighing a little over a pound each.
- Three-year-old Bentley Paulson of Port Washington, Wisconsin, a surviving twin, won recognition in the over 2 to 5 years age category. “Bentley the Brave” was born at 25 weeks, weighed 1 pound 14 ounces at birth and stayed in the NICU 91 days.
- Abby Caraway, 6, of Leander, Texas, was named the winner in the over 5 years age category. “Miracle Girl!” was born at 29 weeks gestation weighing 2 pounds 17 ounces and spent 38 days in the NICU.

- Abigail Poorman, 1, of St. Peterburg, Florida, was chosen for the Executive Director's Award, an award not based on votes. "Admirable Abigail" was born at 25 weeks gestation and weighed 1 pound 11 ounces at birth. She spent more than five months in the NICU.

Hand to Hold is grateful to the contest presenting sponsors Mead Johnson Nutrition, makers of Enfamil; Neotech Products and Prolacta Bioscience for making the contest possible. Winners received Premie Power super hero capes and prize packages of varying values including prizes sponsored by Bambinos Boutique and Huggies.

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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