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By Jeannine Sato

Durham Connects

"Holding babies!" Dana Villalas laughs when asked the favorite part of her job. Villalas is a Durham Connects home visiting nurse and holding babies is one of the job's top requirements. Getting serious, she continues, "my favorite part is feeling as though I can provide something, even if it is little bits of information about taking care of a baby. But more (parents) just want reassurance that everything is okay and they are doing okay." Villalas is one of 10 Registered Nurses visiting new parents in Durham County through Durham Connects. The program provides free in-home nurse visits to parents of newborns in Durham.

Durham Connects nurses have diverse backgrounds, but like many of them, Villalas started out taking care of sick babies. After graduating from UNC's School of Nursing, she worked in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for two years. Villalas said she misses the long-term relationships she was able to build with NICU families, but that the home visiting model was something she was very attracted to. "We're able to address things a little more thoroughly than in an office setting," said Villalas. "It's about listening. I tend to be able to empathize with people readily and put myself in their shoes. Non-judgment is the key in connecting with parents. We're in their personal space and listening without judgment is important."

Durham Connects nurse Yvonne Upshur echoes this sentiment. "I like home visiting. These are intensive visits, so we do fewer. It's more quality than quantity. I want to be able to take time to talk to people. It was attractive in that sense." Upshur spent eight years serving special needs children through the Orange County Health Department before taking her skills to Durham. Upshur knows that a nursing career can take you on many paths and she feels that the uniqueness of Durham Connects is a benefit to the community. Upshur feels that bringing nursing expertise right to a parent's home is a major convenience that is attractive to parents. "These are people that have agreed [to let me in their home] because they think I have something of value to share with them. Time is something you can never get back, so if they're willing to spend time with me because I have something to share, then it's worth it."

Upshur, who is originally from Delaware and has three grown children, is no stranger to hard work. She is currently working toward her Masters degree nursing from East Carolina University and still finds time to read and take some long walks in her spare time. Although, she says she's looking for an exercise partner that will keep her on track. "I need someone who is serious about doing it every day!" she chuckles.

For 36-year-old Villalas, connection to the community goes beyond her work as a nurse. She lives in a tight-knit energy sustainable community in the Triangle and is passionate about the outdoors and nature. Her holistic view of child and maternal health fits well with the non-traditional home-visiting health model. Villalas also holds a coveted skill in health care these days -- she speaks Spanish. About 30-40 percent of the babies seen by Durham Connects are to Spanish-speaking families. The Latino population is often alone in child rearing with families far away and spouses working long hours. Villalas hopes to fill the gap, if only a little bit, and to extend a helping hand to these parents when they need it most. Villalas reminds us that all parents face joys and challenges of parenting. "They may not always realize what challenges will come to the surface and sometimes just talking about their experiences is valuable. Sometime it's nice to have an outside perspective. Women feel like they can do everything. The thing I like about the universality (of Durham Connects) is it leaves parents open to realize that this is a time of high needs for everyone and it is okay to ask for help."

Durham Connects is a free newborn visiting program for Durham County residents that have given birth in Durham County. Currently, babies born on even dates are eligible for a visit. The program is expected to cover all births in 2011. To find out more, visit www.durhamconnects.org, or call (919) 668-3279.

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