

HOME VISIT PROGRAM BEGINS AT THE HOSPITAL

Durham Connects

Natishia O'Neal sits up in bed, bright eyed and smiling as she looks over at her new baby daughter, Breyanna Hawley. Dad snoozes on the sofa and big sister Kristiyanna (K.K.) jumps up to help Mom with the baby.

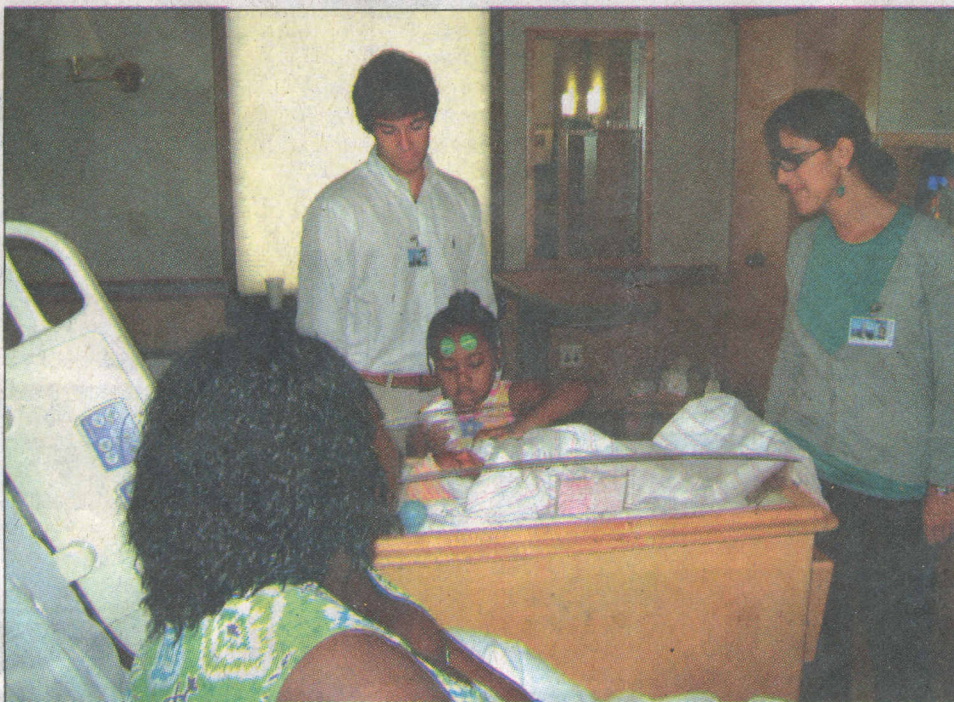
The O'Neal-Hawley family isn't at home, but rather in a hospital room recovering from Breyanna's birth. She is now 1 day old. Hospital rooms are busy places, so Natishia has seen a parade of doctors, nurses, friends and family walk through the door to offer assistance and advice.

But today someone unexpected stopped by. Greg Conforti and Gia Gillis work for Durham Connects, the county's newborn home-visiting program. They have come by O'Neal's room to introduce the program, answer questions and schedule a nurse home-visit for when the family gets back home.

For O'Neal, who had already heard about the program at her doctor's office, the visit was a pleasant surprise. "I thought the poster at the doctor's office was it. I didn't expect someone to make a personal visit in the hospital. It made me think, 'maybe this is something I should try.'"

Initiating the program at the hospital is new for Durham Connects. Program nurses originally called parents after they were discharged from the hospital, but too many parents couldn't be reached and missed the opportunity of the free home visit.

"We quickly realized that once people leave the hospital, life takes over and gets very busy for new parents. Often parents would move, change their phone numbers or stay with relatives temporarily while they adjusted to having a new baby," said Director of Community Resources, Jeannine Sato. "Meeting parents at the hospital for the first time gave us an opportu-



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From left, Natishia O'Neal, Durham Connects employee Greg Conforti, Kristiyanna Hawley and Durham Connects employee Gia Gillis admire one-day-old Breyanna Hawley in O'Neal's hospital room.

nity to not only introduce them to the program, but to get updated contact information and even schedule the home-visit before things got hectic."

Conforti and Gillis were hired by Durham Connects especially to introduce and schedule nurse home visits for parents in the hospital.

"For people who haven't heard of the program, they are pleasantly surprised that the Durham community offers such an amazing support system for new parents," said Gillis. Gillis, who speaks Spanish, visits families in their language of choice. Conforti and Gillis visit new parents in both Durham Regional Hospital and The Duke Medical Center birthing center. Durham Connects hospital visitors should not be confused with Welcome Baby, a long-standing Durham County program in which volunteers visit new parents in the hospital to offer educational materials, support services and a chance to sign up for their coveted monthly newsletter outlining a baby's development milestones.

The Durham Connects hospital visit is shorter and lasts from 5 to 10 minutes.

"I think the hospital meetings between parents and the two programs are complimentary," said Conforti. "Welcome Baby has some amazing on-site education and wonderful classes and groups in their offices, while Durham Connects makes home visits. We work closely together to make sure parents get everything they need at the most exciting and critical time in their lives."

As Conforti confidently enters O'Neal's room, he begins to explain the program's benefits.

"Your nurse will be able to answer questions that come up after you get home with the baby, they'll weigh and measure the baby and check in on your health. Plus they'll bring a nice new parent gift bag for you and the family." Conforti is sensitive in working with parents who are tired from labor, sleep deprived and are excited and nervous about their new roles. He compliments the baby, asks her name and weight and inquires

with the mother about how she is feeling just a day after giving birth.

Both Gillis and Conforti make an extra effort to include the baby's father and any other support people present. The Durham Connects nurse home-visits are intended for the entire family and anyone who will help support the family and raise the child is included.

"We call it Durham's way of welcoming its newest members into the community," said Conforti. "It is in the community's interest for this baby to grow up a healthy, productive citizen." Gillis and Conforti, smile and congratulate Natishia O'Neal as they walk out the door to see the next family — with a few parting words — "Your Durham Connects nurse will see you in a few weeks. We look forward to seeing you again!"

Durham Connects is free to Durham County residents, regardless of income or status. Currently, the new program is available to half of Durham County residents. To find out more about Durham Connects' newborn visiting program and eligibility, please visit www.durhamconnects.org or call 919-668-3279.