

# The Baby Cuddlers

*For a sick baby, these volunteers know there's no better medicine than the human touch*

STORY BY LAURA BERNHEIM  
PHOTO BY DOUG FINGER

**L**AST CHRISTMAS, INSTEAD OF spending the morning with his family, Cliff Preston sat in a hospital holding a screaming baby.

And he didn't want to be anywhere else.

Preston is a volunteer baby cuddler at the UF Health Shands Hospital neonatal intensive care unit, proving that sometimes even the most technologically advanced medical equipment is no match for basic human contact.

The cuddler program, which has been in place at UF Health Shands for about 20 years, helps the hospital's youngest patients cope with surgeries and stress. Premature babies that could weigh only a couple of pounds when born can spend months in the hospital, often hooked up to feeding tubes and respirators.

"I try very hard to get in there on the holidays," Preston says. "Christmas morning there is really a special time. It gives you a perspective for the whole day and makes you appreciate everything you have. The babies don't know what

day it is; the need is still there."

Cuddlers are trained to hold and comfort the babies, which lowers the babies' anxiety and aids in their recovery, says registered nurse Karis Johnson. The cuddlers' three-hour weekly shifts also removes some burden from the parents and hospital staff drawn in multiple directions.

Cuddlers are assigned to the NICU after contacting Volunteer Services, submitting an application and being interviewed. Johnson says there is usually a waiting list to volunteer as a cuddler. Those who get in, like Preston, deeply cherish the experience.

"I like the notion of being able to take a baby that doesn't have a clue in the world of what's going on and making

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that time better for them," he says. "It's only an hour or two, but in that little bit of time, I can make them a little bit happier."

Preston, 58, has been cuddling babies since 1992, stopping by UF Health for a few hours in the morning before moving deeper into campus for his job at UF's Computer Enterprise Systems.

"When I started cuddling, I thought if I did it for a year or two, that'd be great," he says. "Now it's hard to imagine not doing it. It's what I do, part of who I am."

Each week when Preston arrives, he goes through a two-minute hand scrub before going to whatever child needs comforting. If the NICU is quiet, he might help retrieve supplies or pick up laundry. Or, more likely, the nurses direct him to a baby before he can even say hello.

"It's not often that there's nothing to do," says Preston, who is married with grown stepchildren. "It gets interesting when the babies start working together. Some days, I might not hold a baby for two hours. Others, I wish there was four of me."

The "step-down unit" of the NICU, where the infants are more stable, can hold about 30 patients. Nurses care for three or four patients each, according to registered nurse Karis Ferguson.

"It always tugs at your own heartstrings to hear a baby who needs to be held, and I'm over with another patient," Ferguson says.

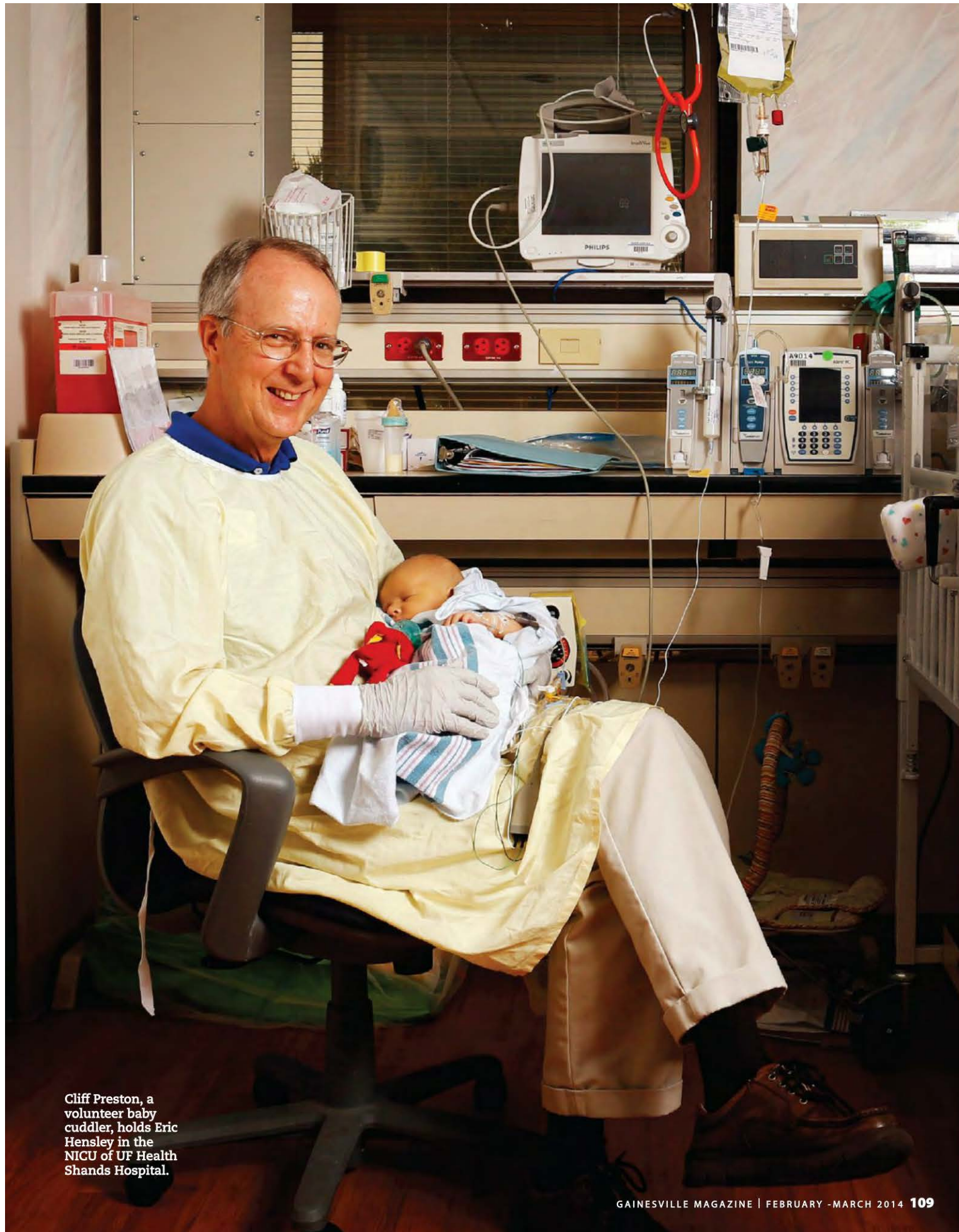
Similarly, parents also can't spend 24 hours a day at their infant's bedside. Families that come to UF Health

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## TO BECOME A CUDDLER ...

Cuddlers are assigned to the NICU after contacting Volunteer Services at 352-265-0360, submitting an application and being interviewed





Cliff Preston, a volunteer baby cuddler, holds Eric Hensley in the NICU of UF Health Shands Hospital.

Tilly Owen knew she wanted to volunteer as a cuddler when she retired, and says she gets the most satisfaction from feeling a baby relax and go to sleep when it's held.

## CUDDLERS

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from out of town typically have had time to seek alternative arrangements such as housing at the Ronald McDonald House because they know their child will have medical concerns upon birth, Ferguson explains. Local families have typically run into something unexpected and need to attend to their house and errands.

Marlene Prado knew early in her pregnancy that her third child would require extensive surgery and care. Jahida's intestines formed on the outside of her body, so Marlene and her 3-year-old son, Xzavian, live in Gainesville's Ronald McDonald House while her husband, Ronald, and oldest son, Edgar, stay at home in Ocala.

Despite her surgeries, Jahida "doesn't have a care in the world" when she's being held, Marlene says.

"She's a little spoiled," she continues. "She'll cry a little bit, someone will come pick her up and she'll be perfectly fine. They tried her in a swing, but she wasn't feeling it too much. She likes people."

Marlene and Xzavian visit Jahida every day, usually for eight to nine hours. Marlene tries to be around for feedings and changings but really appreciates the cuddlers.

"It helps the nurses out, because all she really wants is to be picked up," she says. "It makes me relieved to know that if I'm not here, someone else is."

Another longtime baby cuddler, Tilly Owen, spent 40 years as a pediatric nurse before retiring and moving to Gainesville. She knew she wanted to

volunteer as a cuddler when she retired, and says she gets the most satisfaction from feeling a baby relax and go to sleep when it's held.

According to Owen, cuddlers are in the NICU to equally help the babies, nurses and parents.

"Whatever baby is crying, that's the baby you go to," she says. "And if the parents come, you're happy to pass them back on to their parents, so they get their time."

For new and concerned parents like Gainesville residents Lauren Hensley and Matthew Kron, having the cuddlers on standby is a huge comfort.

Their son, Eric, is one of the few NICU babies that was actually born on time, in early July. But digestive and intestinal complications have kept him in the hospital through three surgeries, and one more is still to come.

Lauren planned on being a stay-at-home mom. Instead, she spends seven to 10 hours a day with Eric in the NICU.

"Now I'm a stay-at-hospital mom," she says. "To me, that doesn't sound like a lot of time to be with your baby, considering that if you were home, you'd be with him constantly. But you still have to sleep and eat, feed the cats and do laundry."

Lauren and Matthew live right down the street from UF Health Shands Hospital on Archer Road. One evening, neither could come visit Eric. Lauren called the unit and asked someone to send a cuddler to her son.

"I've thought about putting a sign above him saying 'I love to be held,'" she says. "He needs it, and I can't be here 24/7. If this has to happen, he's in the best care." 🐾

## TECH

### ULTRA HD

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who've just recently made the leap to Blu-ray players are going to be hard pressed to purchase an expensive new 4K player. Finally, you need content, and until Hollywood sees the demand, the industry is not going to supply 4K content. The fact that Netflix, a major player on all of these levels, will produce and stream 4K content gives the green light to those sitting on the fence.

Who wants to buy a car that goes 200 mph when they live on a 50 mph street? Netflix is essentially offering that open road on which users can drive this new technology.

This is the level of forethought

### CAR CRAZY

#### CAR OF MINE

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even more to love today, among them the recent developments in terms of gas consumption, mileage requirements that mandate smaller engines, and younger people opting out of the auto rat race and putting off getting driver's licenses.

We are even on the brink of self-driving cars, the ultimate insult to the rugged individuality of driving as a means of controlling our destination and our destiny. Who knows where that autonomous auto will stop?

So, in this month of avowed devotion to ... something, or other, let's hope the affection for the car is not over.

It's been a long affair — more than a century — moving from a time when mostly wealthy people had access to a vehicle to the eventual mainstreaming, when Henry Ford realized that he could even put the guys assembling the vehicles behind the wheel in a way that made business sense for both consumer and producer.

At first it was a rather one-sided

## TECH

that goes into making an investment into technology that likely will sell for a fraction of the price in the coming years. I remember the first plasma screen I fell in love with. The price tag was \$15,000. Today it would go for hundreds. Major manufacturers such as Sony, Samsung and LG have Ultra HD offerings from about \$5,000 all the way past the \$100,000 barrier. These sets are so sharp they will seemingly cut the eyes of the beholder. Your friends will be calling you to invite themselves over for movie night. Finding a house sitter will never be a problem as long as you leave them the remote. Get it?

Grab your chips, as the time has come to place your bets on 4K. 🍿

love affair. We loved cars, need to buy them and drive them, while they killed us in rather large numbers. In 1921, the death rate was 24 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. By 2012, the rate was a little over 1 per 100 million miles.

Over the years, we got safer and more independent. Super-highways made loving our cars easy. Smooth sailing, with the only bumps in the road a repair or two.

In October 1961, Groncho Marx hosted an episode of the DuPont Series of the Week called "Merely We Roll Along," devoted to the history of the automobile.

In the show, Marx announced that the once maligned automobile was now something we can't live without, and he declared "America's love affair with the automobile."

A phrase, if not a sentiment, was born. Today, maybe we're in that seven-year itch phase, which experts claim can strike at any time. By the end of 2014, likely by next Valentine's Day, we'll be again on the road to love with our own version of Betsey. 🍿