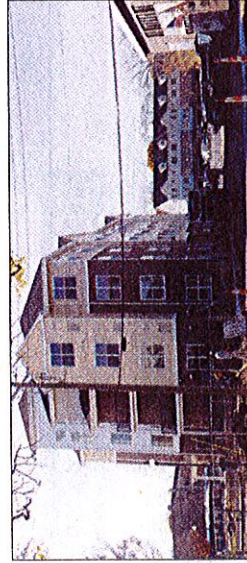


**BUSINESS**

**Top local business stories of the year**



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# THE NEWS-TIME

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Trish Haldin / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Don and Stephanie Williams and their 11-month-old twin sons, Holden, left, and Barrett, right. Holden and Barrett were in the NICU at Danbury Hospital for almost five months. The Tiny Miracles Foundation, a nonprofit organization which works in area hospitals and gives emotional support and guidance to parents, families and loved ones of premature babies, helped the Williams family.

## TINY MIRACLES

# Mentors help parents of preemies

With their children's futures uncertain, new mothers and fathers get the emotional support, guidance they need

By Mackenzie Rigg

**NEW MILFORD** — A year ago, Stephanie Williams spent most of her days in her wood-framed bed, covered in her favorite white wool blanket.

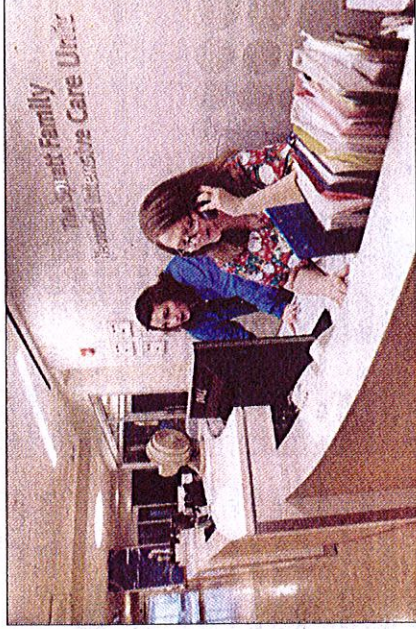
Even last Christmas, when her family filled the home she shares with her husband, Don, she had to stay upstairs in their bedroom because the lives of her unborn twin boys depended on it.

At the beginning of December 2014, her doctors had put her on

bed rest because her cervix was effaced, which meant her body was readying itself for birth. She was only 20 weeks pregnant. Stephanie couldn't stop thinking that her boys might not make it.

She had the twins on Jan. 11, 2015, after her placenta ruptured. She was rushed to Danbury Hospital, where doctors performed an emergency cesarean section because they couldn't stop her bleeding.

See *Preemies* on A4



Carol Kalliff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Nurse Rosann Cremonini, left, and Cindy Hoefler, a unit coordinator, work at the neonatal intensive care unit at Danbury Hospital.

## EDUCATION

# Skill count and costs

More experience means higher salaries for Redding teachers

By Katrina Koerting

**REDDING** — When the Board of Education presented its request recently to the Board of Finance, mentioned that teacher salaries might look high.

That's not because Redding pays its teachers more than other districts, but because district teachers have a higher average level of education and are more likely to have advanced degrees.

As a result, the district has a larger share of teachers at the higher end of its pay scale than many neighboring systems.

Average experience levels fluctuate as teachers are hired, existers gain experience and educators retire. In many districts, groups of teachers roughly the same time through the system in a wave, and in Redding that wave is nearing the pay scale.

"Here, there's a sustained of loyalty between the town, and it's to said Thomas McMorris, superintendent of schools for the district. Easton and Region 10. "In Easton and Region 10 the districts are more distributed, with more Redding's proposed 105 teacher salaries is \$40,000 for the 2016-2017 school year. That figure will begin to occur recently in in Danbury.

In the meantime, the upside for Redding, Mc said: "You have an experience high-quality staff."

Put in number terms, has one of the region's largest shares of teachers with years of experience — 11 percent compared to 14 percent

See *Tea*



## FROM THE FRONT PAGE

### PREEMIES

From page A1

She heard the boys let out squeaks, but after that she heard only silence. They were immediately taken to the neonatal intensive care unit and hooked up to ventilators.

The boys were so small Don's wedding band fit around their arms. He and Stephanie were so unsure of the future that they didn't even name them at first. They felt lost and overwhelmed, even terrified.

But within days, the Williamses met Leelee Klein, the board president of The Tiny Miracles Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides an array of services to premature babies and their families.

Klein is also one of the organization's mentors, who are stationed in Danbury, Norwalk, Bridgeport and Stamford hospitals. The mentors, themselves parents of preemies, meet with new moms and dads in the NICUs to provide emotional support and guidance.

"My main goal is to establish a connection with them so I can give them hope," said Klein, who had premature twin daughters 15 years ago. Both girls survived and are healthy now.

"Mothers have terrible guilt, so what I do is try to bring a sense of calmness and hope, and a guiding hand on how they can handle the first week," she said.

But Klein knows that not all premature babies survive. Her first daughter, born prematurely before the twins, died at 24 weeks. To help parents in such cases, the organization has a group of 35 women mentors who have lost children of their own.

Stephanie was deeply grateful for the compassion shown by the three women who served as her mentors.

"It was just so helpful for me to see other moms who had the same struggles come out the other side," Stephanie said.

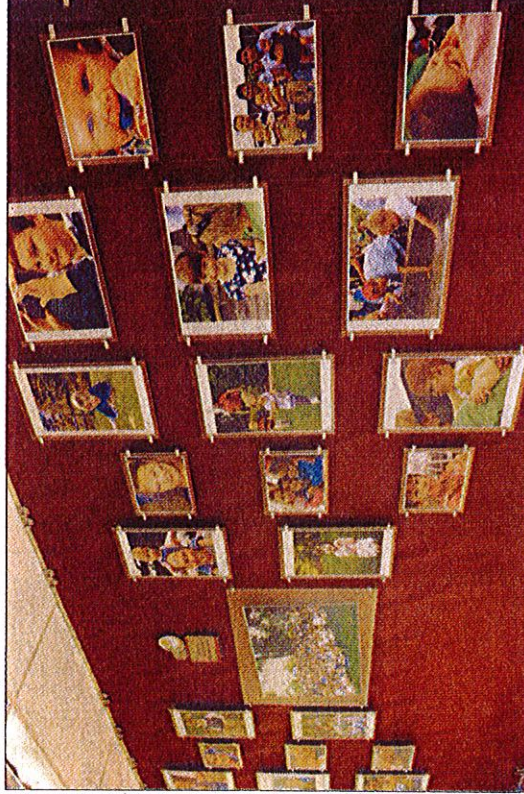
She said the mentors gave her and Don perspective and hope, but were also honest about the struggles that could lay ahead.

"I can't tell you how many times I watched them be revived," she said.

This year, a large Christmas tree adorned in white lights and brightly colored ornaments stood in the Williams family's living room. On each of their laps sat a bouncing, happy boy.

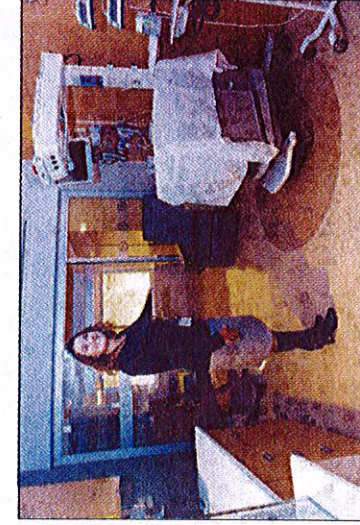
Don, 36, held Holden, who has pudgy round cheeks and blond hair, like his mom. Holden couldn't take his eyes off of the luminous lights hanging from the branches.

In Stephanie's arms was



Carol Kaliff / Hearst Connecticut Media

Photographs of former patients as they grow up hang on a wall in the neonatal intensive care unit of Danbury Hospital.



Robin Black, of Ridgefield, a parent mentor, talks about the work of The Tiny Miracles Foundation on Tuesday.

**"It's just being completely thrown into this world where — from day to day, moment to moment, hour to hour — you don't really know what's going to happen to your babies,"** said Black, who lives in Ridgefield with her children, her fiancé and his two sons.

*Robin Black, parent mentor*

at Danbury Hospital, and is on the Tiny Miracles board of directors.

What she wants all new parents of premature babies to know is that they don't have to go through this alone. There are people and resources available to them to help them through this trying time.

Tiny Miracles provides blankets, diapers, clothes and swaddlers for the babies. The volunteers also give moms dolls to sleep with to help them bond with their babies. The doll retains the mothers' scents and are placed next to the babies in the hospital.

At Danbury Hospital, the medical staff and mentors from Tiny Miracles use whatever they can to keep their tiniest and most fragile patients alive. The hospital's neonatal intensive care unit quadrupled in size in 2011, after the new

Barrett, who has wisps of brown hair, like his dad. The boys will celebrate their first birthday in a few weeks.

"We never thought we'd have them last year," said Stephanie, without taking her eyes off of Barrett.

Robin Black, a mom of triplets, also mentored the Williamses. Black had her children — Ben, Nate and Kate — at 30 weeks at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

"It's just being completely thrown into this world where — from day to day, moment to moment, hour to hour — you don't really know what's going to happen to your babies," said Black, who lives in Ridgefield with her children, her fiancé and his two sons.

"One minute, everything seems great, and the next minute they're fighting for their lives," she said. When her triplets were 5 days old, she went online to search for preemie success stories. That's where she found Tiny Miracles. She read about other babies, some born earlier than her own, who survived.

When her children were 18 months old, she reached out to Tiny Miracles to let them know the impact they had on her and that she wanted to help somehow.

She became a mentor, first doing most of her work by phone because she was working full-time. The first woman she was paired with also had triplets — two boys and a girl.

"I actually found out on my way to go visit her that her daughter had died," she said.

When she got to the woman's home, they sat together holding hands while they both cried. They talked and sat in silence to pray.

"I left her house knowing that day that I had a lot of healing to do myself, but I knew this was something I had to do," she said. "I had to help others to heal myself."

Six and half years later, she's still mentoring, now

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