

coverstory

Celebrating the journey

Dr. Robin's patients are her friends. Once a year, they celebrate (new) life

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OCEANFRONT

Dr. Robin Poe-Zeigler counts hundreds of people each year at her family reunion.

Make that "extended" family.

Poe-Zeigler started The New Hope Center for Reproductive Medicine 10 years ago. Those who attend the party are patients and the children conceived through her First Colonial Road practice.

"My patients and I are close. They become my friends through this personal journey that we experience together," the doctor said.

More than 1,300 people attended this year's reunion, held Sept. 8 at Ocean Breeze Water Park. Some guests stood in line up to two hours to greet "Dr. Robin" or show off a child conceived with her help.

Poe-Zeigler, dressed in a tropical-print dress and broad-brimmed hat, hugged every mother and grandmother and held every child, spending several minutes with each family.

"This is better than Christmas for me," said Poe-Zeigler, 50. "There's no other day quite like this one."

The death of her mother, Yvonne, from breast cancer inspired Poe-Zeigler to enter the medical field.

"At first I thought it was oncology that I wanted to be involved in because it's so personal for the patient. But when I had to tell a family that their mother died from ovarian cancer, I cried more than they did," Poe-Zeigler said. "I relived my mother's death."

She wanted to give her patients hope. That heart tug led her to reproductive endocrinology.

Poe-Zeigler grew up in York, Pa., and studied at Eastern Virginia Medical School. Returning to Pennsylvania, she worked as an OB-GYN. She came back to Hampton Roads to study at Jones Institute for Reproductive Medicine before starting her Virginia Beach practice in February 1997. She is New Hope's sole doctor.

Through New Hope more than 1,600 babies have been born to couples who could not have children. Poe-Zeigler's office is filled with gifts - from cross-stitched wall hangings to figurines - from grateful parents. The collection is so large that she takes items home and rotates what is displayed.

While Poe-Zeigler says she's no miracle worker, patients say otherwise.

"Without Dr. Robin there would be no Hannah," said Lu-



BARBARA J. WOERNER PHOTOS | SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Dr. Robin Poe-Zeigler of The New Hope Center for Reproductive Medicine holds Presley Crutchfield while hugging grandmother Pat Crutchfield at the center's 10th annual picnic at Ocean Breeze Water Park.

cretia Levy of Norfolk. Daughters Hannah, 10, and Miryam, 7, sat on white plastic chairs taking a break from Ocean Breeze's water activities.

Miryam was born through a surrogate mother selected and interviewed by Poe-Zeigler. Levy said she had children from her first marriage but was unable to when she remarried.

"You just go through so much because the first three months after you're pregnant, anything can go wrong," Levy said. "You hold your breath after every phone call."

Lynnhaven resident Poe-Zeigler has had several repeat clients, mostly those who had a single birth from their pregnancy, she said.

Chesapeake resident Donna Beethoven is New Hope patient who welcomed two babies. During the picnic she watched her 8-year-old twin sons, Noah and Sam, frolic in the park's wave pool.

"I believe that God smiles down on Dr. Robin. She is so skilled with in vitro fertilization," Beethoven said. "I was one of her first patients, and she was so different when I met her from other doctors I'd seen."

"She looks you in the eye and says, 'I'm going to do everything I can to make your dream come true.'"

Judi Renner of Moyock, N.C., waited 10 years for a child. She went through an ectopic pregnancy and a miscarriage.

"I never gave up hope," she said. "But I believe God guided me to The New Hope Center."

Renner said she found it in the phone book. Poe-Zeigler discovered her cervical cancer.

"Dr. Robin saw me through that," she said.

Today, Renner has a 4-year-old, Marley.

"I get very emotional about all this. Words cannot express how thankful I am to her because, if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have this child," Renner said.

Poe-Zeigler, who has a son, Derek Zeigler, 12, with her husband, Mark, said her heart aches for those not at her annual party or the celebrations her office holds for each woman who becomes pregnant.

"We have patients still trying to become pregnant," she said. "I'm glad I'm in a place where I'm able to offer them hope."

"If not this time, God willing, maybe the next time," she added.

As each family helped by New Hope grows, so does the reunion that celebrates the children. Poe-Zeigler has held one each year since her practice's inception. That first gathering, held in her office at Christmas, had four babies.

This year's reunion had 567 babies and children born through the practice.

"I can't believe that God has been so good to just set me here to do this," said Poe-Zeigler. "I am eternally humbled."

Info: www.thenewhopecenter.com

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Helen Mae Thorp, 1, of Kitty Hawk, N.C., gets support from her mother, Sherry, while her father saves them a place in line to see Dr. Robin.



Lucretia, center, enjoys Dr. Robin's family reunion with her daughters Hannah, left, and Miryam.