



Aurora, left, and Phoenix Thompson Bailey, born Dec. 2, rest on Dec. 11 at the Salem Health Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. The twins are wearing clothing made by inmates at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility and Oregon Corrections Enterprises. ANNA REED / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Unlikely partnership provides clothes for preemies at Salem Hospital

CAPI LYNN
SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

Aurora and Phoenix are snuggled in an isolette in the neonatal intensive care unit at Salem Hospital, wearing matching sleepers with pink hearts almost as big as theirs.

The Thompson Bailey twins, born on Dec. 2, more than four weeks premature, are oblivious to the camera and the spotlight.

They don't know it yet, but they've just notched their first modeling gig.

The twins are among the first babies

to wear customized preemie clothing designed and manufactured by inmates at Coffee Creek Correctional Institute, a women's prison in Wilsonville.

A cute and comfy clothing line, made with input from local NICU nurses, has been developed through a unique partnership between Salem Health and Oregon Corrections Enterprises.

Preemie clothing can be difficult to find, and it isn't functional for infants with wires and tubes attached to their fragile little bodies.

In the past, NICU staff browsed local retail stores, which have limited selections, and snapped up all the preemie

clothes they could.

"You don't want a NICU nurse out shopping when they're supposed to be doing their job," said Jonathan Fetterley, the hospital's former linens services supervisor.

Fetterley was one of the project instigators. He had a conversation with NICU nurse manager Andrea Bell, and they worked with officials at OCE, which has been providing linen service for Salem Health since 2009.

It took two years, but the first transaction recently was completed. A freshly laundered bag of 150 preemie outfits featuring playful patterns with hearts, stars, puppies and fish was delivered Dec. 12.

It was an early Christmas present for the NICU staff and its 18 current patients. The NICU cares for an average of 12 babies at a given time. The number is higher now because there are multiple sets of twins.

The Thompson Bailey twins are thriving. Aurora weighed 2 pounds, 15 ounces when she was born and Phoenix 3 pounds, 2.1 pounds. They now weigh 3 pounds, 10.7 ounces and 3 pounds, 13.7 ounces, respectively.

The women on the production team at Coffee Creek were thrilled to hear about the twins' modeling debut. Team trainer Tammy Traxtle spoke on their behalf by phone from the prison.

"For the entire team, this is special to us," Traxtle said. "We've all given birth. We've all been incarcerated over a year and away from our children. Being a part of a team that gets to make baby clothes has been powerful for all of us."

Nine women make up the team, which is part of OCE's textiles program at Coffee Creek. Oregon Corrections Enterprises is an independently-run program that provides work and on-the-job training for inmates in 10 prisons across the state.

The textiles program trains inmates in the basics of sewing, embroidery and quilting. Top students are hired for the production team.

None of them had experience making baby clothing. Few had any sewing background.

What little experience they had was limited to what Traxtle referred to as straight lines on items such as quilts and bags. She came to the project with commercial sewing training through OCE.

They started from scratch by taking a couple of regular-sized baby outfits that OCE General Manager Dave Conway had purchased and doing some reverse engineering.

"We shrunk it and shrunk it and shrunk it," Conway said.

He also bought an 11-inch doll for the team to use for sizing. The inmates call her Oceana, pronounced Oh-see-aw-nuh, a play off the Oregon Corrections Enterprises name. She turns 2 in February, and Traxtle said she has the best wardrobe.

Sizing was important. Much of the manufactured clothing for premature infants is too big. So was functionality. Retail preemie clothes are not made to accommodate IVs and feeding tubes.

"In the beginning, it was a lot of trial and error," Traxtle said. "We made templates and then it was a matter of resizing and re-cutting, resizing and re-cutting."

A quarter-inch on a preemie outfit makes a huge difference, and the team wanted them to be just perfect.

Once they were ready to begin actual production, each team member was assigned a task, such as cutting fabric, serging seams, overlapping seams, making sleeves, sewing parts together, binding for snaps, ribbing on cuffs, and attaching snaps.

The shop has 10 sewing machines in the production area, four serger machines, and two cover-stitch machines. A serger trims the seam allowance and encloses the edge of the fabric to prevent fraying — all in one step.

Traxtle, in charge of quality control estimates two of every 25 garments made for Salem Health was returned to be fixed or remade.

Finding the right fabric was a challenge. With each sample they tried, they washed and dried it multiple times to test shrinkage.

They chose a cotton and polyester blend from a vendor in Pennsylvania. It's ultra-soft and has just the right stretch.

Nurses and moms on staff at Coffee Creek visited the shop throughout the process, offering their own suggestions.

Samples of a half-dozen different types of outfits were delivered to the hospital for NICU staff to review quality, sizing and design.

The staff whittled their order down to three styles: onesies, gowns, and sleepers without feet.

Staff suggestions, such as relocating snaps that would be in the way of medical tubing, were adopted before final samples were approved.

"That's one of the best parts about this," Fetterley said, "ultimate customization."

Fetterley, who now works in a different department, joined other hospital officials for the first delivery of preemie clothes. They posed for photographs with OCE officials and Bell, the NICU nurse manager.

"This one's perfect for tubes and cords and lines," Bell said, holding up a white onesie with purple puppies and pink hearts.

She also loves the quality of the clothing, which she can already tell holds up better wash after wash than what they've purchased in the past at retail stores. The fabric often is so thin it's easily tattered.

Conway was excited to report back to the women on the production team, who cheered him earlier that day as he left the shop at Coffee Creek.

"They make these clothes with a lot of love," he said. "It's not a sweatshop. These women want to be here. Sometimes in our world, people mumble and grown about Mondays. Here, they are lining up on Monday."

Conway and the women are hopeful they can expand the program and eventually sell preemie clothing to other hospitals.

"Forward This" appears Wednesdays and Sundays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Wilamette Valley. Contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her the rest of the week on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.

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