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Community marches for Babies

By Elizabeth M. Mack • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • April 11, 2010

Triplets A.J., Emily and Morgan Morato weighed barely 4 pounds when they were born prematurely seven years ago.

Their mom, Lisa Morato, remembers seeing their tiny bodies and wanting to touch and hold them but not knowing how. Morato, a licensed nurse, had had experience with premature babies, but she said it was very different seeing her own babies born early.

"It's really overwhelming — you don't know what's going to happen," she said. "Seeing them now, you would never know. They're big, strong and healthy, doing what seven year olds are supposed to do."

Morato credits the March of Dimes, which for decades has been funding research designed to combat premature birth, birth defects and low birth weight. Each year, more than 525,000 babies, or 1 in 8, are born too soon, according to the organization.

On Saturday, she and her triplets took part in the Big Bend March of Dimes' annual March for Babies, a celebration of fundraising efforts held downtown.

"It's because of the research that is funded by the March of Dimes that helped save my babies," Morato said. "I'm so grateful."

Dr. A.J. Brickler, an obstetrician at North Florida Women's Care, helped deliver the triplets. He cited

the importance of research, including work being done at Florida State University's College of Medicine on links between the lack of melatonin and pre-term labor.

"Research is very important in developing pre-natal care," he said. "That's how we know about the importance of getting enough folic acid. Events like this, with the community showing their support, only helps."

Jennifer Bitner, executive director of the local March of Dimes, said the organization has raised \$185,000 so far. Officials with the organization hope to reach their goal of \$225,000 by July.

"We still hold on to the Roosevelt concept of asking for dimes to raise money for polio research — and today, we have a cure," she said. "This is a grass-roots organization."

More than 50 teams from local organizations, schools and businesses, took part in the march. The event also featured dancing, bounce houses, a Nintendo Wii gaming station and performances by the Mountain Dew Cloggers.

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