Education Goes the Distance
IT’S NOT SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN LIKE THIS.

All babies are supposed to go full term. Parents should leave the hospital with their new baby in their arms. No one should have to plan a funeral for their newborn. At least Bree and Scott Anderson thought that way until one Sunday in November 2006.

STORY BY KATHY RIVERS
PHOTOS BY JOE TRELEVEN
As the result of in vitro fertilization, they were put into a high-risk category despite their excellent health and being in their mid-20s. At the time, Bree was a busy elementary school teacher enjoying her pregnancy, imagining life with twins and preparing for their March 10, 2007, due date. She had just read about how 24 weeks marked the point where babies can be born and still have a fighting chance at survival. Early the next morning she woke up at 3 a.m. because she was leaking fluid. The couple called their doctor and soon made the 100-mile trip in record speed from their home in southern Minnesota to their medical team’s home base of Sanford Medical Center in Sioux Falls, S.D. By doing so, they entered a world of doctors, nurses, risks and decisions that they never expected.

Dennis Stevens, M.D., a neonatologist, explained Bree was leaking from her amniotic sack but if the babies were delivered that day, they would be very sick. Bree remained under the watchful eye of the perinatology staff along with the NICU physicians and nurses and began receiving steroid shots to develop the boys’ lungs. On Nov. 21, after a fitful night of contractions, Carter Anderson was born breech at 24 weeks gestation, weighing 1 pound, 5 ounces. Bree was expecting to deliver baby No. 2 but the perinatologist gave her medicine to stop the contractions and to close her cervix for what they told her could be a few hours, or at most a few days – precious time, building up his lungs in particular. Brother Logan was born on Dec. 5, exactly two weeks after his brother and weighed 1 pound, 14 ounces. Bree remembers that Logan looked plump compared to Carter.

NICU Nurse Kara Mergen remembers the Andersons well. As with other families, Mergen spent a lot of time with them, caring for the boys and listening to mom and dad’s concerns and fears. But, she wanted to do more. Mergen wanted to gain the knowledge required to make more decisions and learn how to perform more procedures. Soon after meeting the Andersons, she decided to become a neonatal nurse practitioner (NNP) by enrolling in the Vanderbilt University School of Nursing’s blended distance format program – one of eight nurses at Sanford Medical Center who have gained crucial advanced education from Vanderbilt’s program.

The Sanford Model

Unfortunately, the Andersons are not alone in dealing with very premature or very sick babies. This same situation is played out hundreds of times in NICUs throughout the country every day, fueling the growing demand and national shortage of neonatal nurse practitioners.
The neonatal nurse practitioner (NNP) combines nursing and medical knowledge and is chiefly responsible for clinical management of the high-risk infants. NNPs are expert clinicians who fill an important role on health care team by obtaining histories, performing physical assessments, formulating diagnoses, and developing and implementing treatment plans.

Many studies have shown that the NNP role is cost-effective and has a positive impact on the infant’s well being. As a result, hospitals with large NICU units are often looking for neonatal nurse practitioners. Today, there are more than 600 neonatal nurse practitioner vacancies throughout the country, according to ENSEARCH Management Consultants which matches NNPs with vacancies.

A few years ago, Neonatal Nurse Practitioner Manager Kathy Schweitzer, M.S., C.N.P., realized that her home institution of Sanford Medical Center in Sioux Falls was facing a significant neonatal nurse practitioner shortage. The NICU serves the state of South Dakota as well as parts of Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota and Nebraska. First, she tried recruiting from outside the area, which proved unsuccessful, since at the time there were six NNP vacancies nationally for every licensed NNP for hire.

So she developed a business plan to essentially grow Sanford’s own nurse practitioners. The idea was to take registered nurses who were already committed to the NICU and Sioux Falls community and offer them a professional growth opportunity.

The result was she developed a NNP Loan Forgiveness Program at Sanford, where approved registered nurse candidates could earn their current salary plus receive tuition and books reimbursement while going to school full-time to earn their master’s in the NNP specialty. In return, the student would “pay back” the financial investment by agreeing to work at Sanford as a neonatal nurse practitioner for five years.

“When I first pitched the idea to the nursing staff, they were a little leery of it,” said Schweitzer. “Currently, our biggest advocates for the loan reimbursement program to become NNPs are the students who have utilized it and are now working as neonatal nurse practitioners in the NICU. It has definitely been a success.”

Building a Partnership

When developing the business plan, Schweitzer looked at a number of distance learning programs throughout the country, but felt Vanderbilt University School of Nursing’s program was the best fit. She learned that the schedule, called “modified block,” meant that students could do a large portion of their work through lectures and presentations online in their home state mixed with three to four trips to Nashville each semester for intensive classroom work. Full-time students earn 39 semester hours in only 12 months (three semesters), versus the two-year traditional master’s programs with the same number of credit hours.

Once the students complete the program at Vanderbilt School of Nursing,
they start a 12-plus month internship period back at Sanford to transition into their new roles. New graduates become licensed and certified as neonatal nurse practitioners within a few months and then start out becoming comfortable managing eight to 12 infants a day, on day shifts, followed by working nights independently, and then eventually orienting to a neonatal nurse practitioner transport role as part of a regional service. The internship provides opportunities for in-depth discussions and opportunities to spend time with the neonatologists as well as the other pediatric subspecialists within the hospital.

And the program has caught on at Sanford in a big way — eight Sanford nurses have made or are making the transition to neonatal nurse practitioner through the Vanderbilt program.

Sanford currently has three students at Vanderbilt School of Nursing in the neonatal nurse practitioner program directed by Karen D’Apolito, Ph.D., A.P.R.N., C.N.S., N.N.P. Kara Mergen, who helped so much during the Anderson twins’ stay, Tige Bjornson (married to Kerri Bjornson, a 2006 Vanderbilt NNP graduate), and Holly Wiswall are thrilled to be earning their master’s in this way.

“The structure of the program allows me to still be a good husband and father while I’m a student.”

Wiswall feels she gets more out the lectures because they are online or CD-ROM. “I can watch lectures at the best time for me, and if there is something I don’t get the first time, I can stop and go back to it.”

The three spend a lot of time together with other classmates conversing online as well as traveling from Sioux Falls to Nashville for block weekends. They have frequent test preparation sessions that start at 9 a.m. sharp in their favorite booth at Oscar’s Coffee Shop in Sioux Falls.

Wiswall makes the flash cards; and the group bounces questions off each other for four or five hours. They typically have a pile of empty coffee cups when they disperse to take their tests.

They all agree that their Vanderbilt education is teaching them to become critical thinkers, because it has taught them more of the science and methodology behind the decisions they will soon be making. “If you have a better understanding of why, then you have a better understanding of how,” said Wiswall.

Collaborative Care in the NICU

Mergen stays in touch with the Anderson family and thinks of them often as she continues her classes at Vanderbilt.

It was 143 days before Carter and Logan Anderson were both home from the hospital, and through it all, the staff, particularly the nurses in the Sanford NICU, made all the difference to the Anderson family.

“We loved all the nurses,” said Bree Anderson. “We loved Kara Mergen from the first time we met her because she was always so bubbly and positive. I remember many times when the doctors would come in and tell us something, and I would turn to Kara, Michelle or another nurse with us and ask, ‘OK, what did he just say?’”

Anderson recalls those scary days. Logan was doing well, but Carter had serious issues with his bowels and breathing. Through it all, the nurses tried to help the family, even moving bedridden Bree into the boys’ rooms in order to participate in their baptism. The nurse practitioners kept the Andersons informed of the plan of care and progress with their sons.

“It’s hard for parents to be part of the care and bonding,” said Bree. “We couldn’t hold them in our arms. Their skin was see-through and their eyes were fused shut, but the nurses taught us to gently
press down on their arms with two fingers so they would know we were there.”

Carter ended up needing two surgeries where most of his bowel was removed. The physician told the Andersons that Carter might not survive the second operation, so while Carter was in the operating room, they prayed and started planning his funeral. They were thrilled when they learned he made it through surgery and was going to recover.

A Bright Future

Thanks to their excellent medical care and the strength of their parents and family, the Anderson twins are doing well. Logan and Carter had a memorable first birthday party and recently visited the Sanford NICU for an emotional homecoming. Logan has been very healthy and Carter has continued to fight. He has been plagued with respiratory issues, and will use a feeding tube until he’s age 3.

And thanks to blended distance learning opportunities from the Vanderbilt School of Nursing, the number of neonatal nurse practitioners available to take of the increasing numbers of sick infants at Sanford has increased. Bjornson, Mergen and Wiswall will soon join the ranks of their predecessors who have made the transition from neonatal nurse to neonatal nurse practitioner through the Vanderbilt program. Timing was crucial since the Sanford NICU has expanded to 58 beds, with 130 nurses, 20 neonatal nurse practitioners and seven neonatologists. In the last year, the new NICU has experienced a dramatic increase in admissions. The demand will continue to grow as they add a freestanding children’s hospital in 2009. She is fielding applications from her staff to begin another cycle in the successful partnership between Sanford and Vanderbilt.

“The quality of students coming out of this program has been very high, the students are well-prepared as neonatal nurse practitioners, and we have developed a strong relationship with the Vanderbilt NNP program,” said Schweitzer.
Amy Cassidy knew from a young age that she wanted to be a nurse, just like her grandmother. While attending undergraduate classes at Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, her goal was to someday earn an advanced practice degree in nursing. After a move to Nashville for her husband’s career, she joined Vanderbilt University Medical Center as a trauma unit nurse and soon learned about the convenience and efficiency of the School of Nursing’s distance program.

Even though she lives just 15 miles away and works two blocks from the nursing campus, Cassidy chose the blended program that would allow her to keep working while earning her M.S.N. in two years. By doing so, she could also take advantage of the tuition reimbursement program that covers a majority of the cost of her education.

“They say you can do your online work in your pajamas, and I often do,” said Cassidy. “I also like to watch portions of lectures and re-watch lectures because it helps my study habits and suits my learning style.”

Cassidy’s is part of a triumvirate that includes Beth Potts and Laurie Ford who also work at the VUMC trauma unit and are on the same educational track.

“Beth makes sure all of our assignments are done on time; Laurie makes sure we know all the facts, and I help keep the pace,” said Cassidy. “At work, we can print out syllabus or class handouts for the next day, call out facts to each other or practice things like ophthalmic examinations on our trauma patients.”

Cassidy believes the most important part of her education is becoming a critical thinker. “Now it is my full responsibility to know everything about ‘what’ and everything about ‘why,’”

After she finishes, Cassidy plans on exploring her many options in critical care as a nurse practitioner and looks forward to what she considers a crowning moment – writing her first official prescription.

Alex Sargsyan likes change. He earned his master’s in chemistry in Armenia and was working at Fine Organic Chemistry Research Institute in Yerevan, Armenia. When he came to America in his 20s, he was drawn to nursing as a second career. He started working at a nursing and rehabilitation facility, earned his associate degree, followed by his baccalaureate (summa cum laude from Western Carolina University). He worked in cardiac care for a hospital for three years as a registered nurse and was looking to combine his interests with people and technology in an advanced practice nursing role. Vanderbilt School of Nursing was the solution. With one intensive year of education, he will earn his advanced practice degree while maintaining his life in Asheville.

Ironically, Sargsyan is both student and teacher this year as he pursues his master’s at Vanderbilt while also teaching pharmacology, anatomy and physiology, and medical terminology at South College in Asheville.

“It’s very interesting to be at Vanderbilt and learn from my instructors by interacting – for me it’s enhanced because I can see how others behave and what I can incorporate as a teacher in my own courses,” said Sargsyan.

He likes the Vanderbilt approach that combines the convenience of online learning with the intensity of didactic courses during block weekends. He feels his instructors are readily available and responsive via e-mail and that the communications and IT systems between the instructors and students create a cohesive community for learning.

“Distance learning is great,” said Sargsyan. “We are not depleted of anything. Instead we have the flexibility to work because our course work fits our schedules and can also implement what we are learning directly into our work lives.”

In addition to teaching, he is on staff at Pardee Hospital and particularly enjoys opportunities to serve as a preceptor. He would like to parlay his advanced practice degree into a position in a private cardiology practice where he could enjoy the partnership of critical thinking skills and understanding of technology to improve patient care, or perhaps into additional teaching opportunities. He likes change.
Alexis Chettiari has solo-cycled across South America, Chile, Argentina, Japan, Iceland, Thailand, throughout Europe, Mexico and Canada, so she knows herself and she knows people. In 2000 as an associate degree-prepared nurse, she enrolled in the Vanderbilt School of Nursing distance program from her home in Northern California. She completed the first year and then cycled across Malaysia, surprised when the U.S. forces started bombing Iraq. In this Muslim country and in the middle of harm, she wanted to do something more meaningful by volunteering. She got off track on her formal education, came back to the States, got married and had her first child. She resumed her education in August 2006.

“When I started the program, it was really new and not fully developed,” said Chettiari. “When I came back, I was amazed at how they have it wired — resources are really accessible and there are a variety of different formats.”

She admits she doesn’t know what she would do without lectures available on the MP3 format. “I go running and grocery shopping with my iPod on and hear Professor Larry Lancaster lecturing on physiology, which really helps me learn the information.”

Always ready for an adventure, Chettiari opted to camp at Percy Priest Lake equipped with her tent and flashlight during the warm weather months instead of staying at area hotels. She would use her time on campus wisely and study at the library until it closed. Some of her Nashville-based classmates opened their homes to her during the winter and she has come to really enjoy the time with her classmates and friends during the block weekends.

Chettiari is working in an emergency department in Oakland, but has not ruled out eventually exploring other inpatient-focused areas.

“By continuing my education at Vanderbilt, I come out way ahead,” said Chettiari. “If you are going to invest two years in some sort of pursuit, nothing will give you a better return on your investment. It’s miraculous.”

Nebraska native Kim Baker loves to learn. She has continued her nursing education through earning her women’s health certificate in addition to her years of experience gained from various nursing positions. About two years ago she started investigating online advanced practice nursing degree options, despite being located relatively close to the University of Nebraska’s Lincoln and Omaha campuses. Baker believes she found a good fit with Vanderbilt School of Nursing’s program that allows her to learn in a blended distance format and complete the intensive program in one year.

A wife, mother and adult learner, Baker spends approximately 35 hours a week listening to online lectures and doing school work along with doing a preceptorship at a private practice in Lincoln two days a week.

“There is a lot of camaraderie among my classmates when we are on campus for block weekends and online,” said Baker. “The combination of students and professors has created a wonderful personal touch.”

Baker most recently worked at a community mental health facility and was on the medication management side. She knew that 15-minute medicine checkups with patients were important, but not a comprehensive approach.

Through her interest and Vanderbilt education, Baker believes she has become even more aware of a great need for patients to have a counseling component, “I think touching base and helping someone at a pivotal moment of depression, anxiety or crisis is crucial.”

“The greatest thing we’ve been given is relationships so we can talk to someone and share concerns,” she added.

Baker credits professors, fellow classmates and her family for making it possible for her to complete the one-year program. She admits that having a husband who is a private pilot helps as well.

Baker is scheduled to complete the program in August 2008 and hopes to join a private practice in Nebraska.