

Short lives remembered.



COURTESY OF JESSICA RIEHL

*For families of dying children,
local photographers give an
incredible gift – pictures of love*

As Jessica Riehl walked through the front door of the Norfolk home, she noticed the typical signs of a newborn's homecoming. A "Welcome home" banner. Bobbing balloons. Flowers and teddy bears and soft, baby blue blankets.

Taking portraits of children and their families is Riehl's profession, and she'd done it a hundred times. But this one felt different.

The baby would die within days, maybe even hours.

Sully Anderson had been diagnosed with Trisomy 18, a genetic disorder that kills most children in the womb or days after birth. His parents, Heidi and Brad Anderson, had learned the diagnosis five months earlier.

As Riehl stood in the doorway, her mind filled with questions: How would she express her sympathy, and yet move ahead with her reason for being there? What would the baby look like?

And most important, could she take this one-and-only opportunity to photograph the child and return the images to his family as healing keepsakes?

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By ELIZABETH SIMPSON | *The Virginian-Pilot*

PORTRAITS

PRESERVING BABIES' LAST MOMENTS

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As soon as she met the couple and saw Sully's serene face, worry fell away.

"They were so warm and loving, and so happy to have me. You don't think about what the next week will hold, because you don't know. I put that in the back of my mind, and so did they."

The session in February 2008 was the first Riehl had for an organization called Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.

The international effort includes some 7,000 volunteer photographers who are on call to go where babies and children are about to die, often in intensive care units, and sometimes in homes.

The volunteers photograph the children with their families for free. Besides preserving here-today-gone-tomorrow images, the sessions can be healing for families. Decades ago, stillborn babies – who number about 26,000 a year – were whisked away to morgues, but the belief now is that parents often benefit from holding their children and acknowledging their lives, however short.

They may not even think about photographs until asked, and when they accept the gift, they bestow a special trust in the person behind the lens.

"You have one chance to photograph this boy or girl in this world," Riehl said.

Riehl, 30, is married and has her own photography business geared toward capturing families together in relaxed outdoor and home settings. She's photographed nine children for Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, and so far, Sully has been the only one who made it home. Because of that, it felt like a regular family photo session for her.

"He looked very peaceful," Riehl said. "There was something right about him being home."

Heidi, his mother, remembers feeling that way as well, and took pleasure in the sense of the ordinary.

Riehl went about her work, photographing close-ups of Sully's feet and hands, his smooth-skinned face below a soft, blue cap. Portraits of Sully being held by his sister, Ella, and brother, Zane. Family shots with his grandparents, his aunt and uncle.

After about an hour, Riehl asked Heidi and Brad to stand near a window with Sully. Through the lens, she saw a shift in mood as tears slid down Heidi's face.

Even after a year, Heidi recalls the same pose.

"I remember thinking that this would be all I had of my little Sully, these moments, these pictures."

Riehl gathered her equipment, said goodbye and got back into her car. She immediately looked at the back of her camera to make sure the images were there before putting her key in the ignition to drive home to Chesapeake.

Her camera put aside, her assignment complete, she felt her composure crumble.

Tears fell as she drove away.

Sully died a few days later.

Seventeen photographers in Hampton Roads have signed on to help with Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep. Ritchie Gregory, a Virginia Beach photographer, coordinates the effort locally with hospital social workers.

She was inspired to do it by Littleton, Colo., photographer Sandy Puc', who started the organization in 2005 with the mother of a 6-day-old baby Puc' photographed while the child was being taken off life support.

Gregory, 51, is married with a 21-year-old daughter. She owns a portrait studio in Virginia Beach, where images of families and plump babies and laughing children adorn the walls.

Her volunteer work takes her down a different, more intense path. During the past three years, Gregory has photographed more than

20 children for the organization. The youngest was a baby born three months too early, the oldest a child 18 months old.

"If it's sudden, I know it'll be raw, I know there will be people who have not come to grips with their emotions," Gregory said.

The hospital room images stay with her.

A sobbing father pounding the wall with his fist.

The parents who want photos but can't bear to be there while she takes them.

Twins, one who lived, the other near death, and the bittersweet looks on the faces of the parents. The father smiling proudly with the healthy one, and the mother looking down at the one who would die.

The young couple she waited hours for in the lobby while they mustered the strength to take their child off life support.

"They could not let go of that baby."

When she enters the room, she clears her mind of expectations, assesses what's going on with the family and sets to work. She doesn't think about what the future holds.

"I try not to go there. My job is to stay in the present. That's what I can give, myself in the present."

She learned that lesson on her first session.

A pregnant mother e-mailed because she had found out her baby had a genetic defect that doctors expected would be fatal within days after birth.

Gregory went to Sentara Norfolk General Hospital to photograph the baby when she was born.

"That baby is alive today," Gregory said. "That ended up being a happy case."

Sometimes the sessions last 15 minutes, other times hours. Most parents want to hold the baby, but sometimes not.

"You allow people the space to go through what they need to," Gregory said. "Everyone deals with these sorts of things in their own time and their own way."

Last October, Riehl received a call from a social worker at Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters in Norfolk.

A couple from Utah, Ryan and Mandi Wood, had adopted a set of twins born in Norfolk in July.

One baby was born healthy, but the other had a traumatic birth and suffered a loss of oxygen. The Wood family didn't know anyone here, but a social worker hooked them up with a family who went to the same church denomination and invited the Woods to stay with them while they were here.

Her husband returned to Utah after a few days, and Mandi remained in Norfolk for about two weeks. Then she flew home with the healthy twin. She and her husband – who also have a 6-year-old son – expected to return for Ian when he was ready to be released.

When he didn't improve, the couple wanted to transfer him to a children's hospital in Utah, but before that could happen, Ian's condition worsened. A doctor recommended he be removed from life support, predicting he would suffer another episode that would end his life.

Mandi and her husband decided to take the baby off life support to spare him pain. Mandi called the friend they had stayed with, who agreed to be with Ian.

Riehl was there as well and took photos of the baby before he was removed from the respirator. Afterward, the nurses and social workers removed the maze of tubes and tape and gauze, then dressed the baby in a white gown.

"It was immensely tender," Riehl recalled. "It doesn't get any more tender than the way they dressed him and touched him, how they knew how he liked to have his hair combed and how he liked sponge baths."

The friend, Pam Hunter-Holmes, held the baby during his final breaths while Riehl took photographs.

Ritchie Gregory



L. TODD SPENCER | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT



COURTESY OF RITCHIE GREGORY

■ "When I am coming home from one of these sessions ... my heart is wide open."

Ritchie Gregory

Jessica Riehl



STEVE EARLEY | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

■ "The babies all strike me as angelic, and ethereal, something that is here today and gone the next. They are so serene. ... They've moved on."

Jessica Riehl



COURTESY OF JESSICA RIEHL

Charles Hartman



L. TODD SPENCER | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

more information

For information about Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, click on www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org.

A doctor checked Ian's heartbeat, which Riehl chronicled, and declared his time of death.

Riehl spent two hours there, and sent the parents photographs that afternoon.

"It helped my husband and I feel like we were part of the moment," Mandi said.

She had felt a lot of guilt about not being able to stay in Norfolk after Ian was born, and not being there when he died.

The photographs eased the grief. First, she could see he was surrounded by people who loved him. She saw how tenderly the social workers, the nurses and her friend held him.

She felt grateful her son, Darek, would someday see what his twin looked like. Once born, they were never in the same room again.

And finally, Mandi could see Ian at peace.

"It wasn't a struggle, it was a peaceful moment. That was so comforting."

A week later, the photos were displayed at the baby's funeral in Utah.

Though the photographers don't talk a lot with others about their experiences, they share among themselves and support one another through difficult sessions.

"How I hold this is we do not know why this little person came into the world," Gregory said. "It's not for us to understand why they are here such a short time."

The children bring an appreciation of life, though, an understanding of its fragility and "how quickly it can come and go," Gregory said.

"When I am coming home from one of these sessions ... my heart is wide open."

The sessions are a piece of her overall work as a portrait photographer, only intensified.

"I like working with babies," she said, glancing at a framed photograph on the wall of healthy newborn trip-lets. "It's like working with miracles, like, 'How the heck did that happen?' Birth is such an incredible window to God, and so is death. Part of the positive for me is to get a glimpse of that. Just as birth is a miracle, so is death. It's a reuniting from where we came."

Charles Hartman, a professional photographer who works for a studio in Portsmouth, remembers photographing a boy being removed from life support after a year on a respirator. The single 48-year-old braced himself for an emotional session but was surprised at the parents' composure.

"The family had time to prepare, so when the child passed, it wasn't so much grief as gratitude that the child was not going to be suffering anymore."

It wasn't until he returned to his studio that the emotion caught up with him. The camera that separated him from the family in the hospital room was gone, and it was just he and the child and the computer screen.

He gets tearful a year later thinking about it.

But gratitude from the family is sweet balm.

"They were sad they lost their child, but they felt a conclusion," said Hartman, who prefers not to share his images with anyone but the family. "What they said to me was they were so glad they had these images of this child in their life."

For Riehl, the sessions catch fleeting moments in a family history that might otherwise be lost.

Sully's older brother and sister, for instance, will always have photographs of themselves holding their brother. And Sully's younger brother, Jasper, born last month, will grow up in a house with Sully's portrait on the wall.

Beyond that, it's also a rare crevice of life the photographers glimpse and appreciate.

There's an edge of reality to this aspect of their portfolios: the moist, too-small hand of a baby draped on a mother's finger. The chapped lips of an infant after months on life support. Tender bodies criss-crossed with oxygen tubes.

And often there's a transcendent sense of peace as well. Riehl feels grateful to be part of such intimate moments.

"The babies all strike me as angelic, and ethereal, something that is here today and gone the next. They are so serene, they're not in pain anymore."

"They've moved on."