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For Parents of Premies, A Little Innovation from Angel Eye

By [Mark Carter](#), 5/4/2015 12:00:00 AM

In September 1999, our oldest son was born premature. Eager to celebrate his birthday, and perhaps not miss out on football season, he arrived three months early, an expected Christmas present delivered ahead of schedule.

Born at 3 pounds and 13 ounces, a good size for 28 weeks, he spent the first six weeks of his life in the neonatal intensive care unit, the NICU, at Baptist Health Medical Center in Little Rock. Living in Hillcrest just a few miles down I-630, we were able to spend as much time with him as the NICU staff would allow. Back then the unit had visiting hours, even for parents, and each night we'd drag ourselves away from the incubator with heavy hearts.

Compared with other parents of premature babies in the Baptist unit, however, we were lucky. Our premature baby was free from complications, aside from cooking a little too fast, and we lived just a 10-minute drive away.

Each day on our way into the preemie nursery, we passed incubators whose occupants were much smaller than our son, and who never seemed to have any visitors apart from the nurses in the unit. We were told that many of the premies were born to parents who lived in other parts of the state and couldn't afford to take off work to visit their babies, at least not during the week.

If only those parents had been able to make a connection, any sort of connection, with their children during the days they couldn't be there in person ... A perfect situation for a little innovative thinking.

The tech-based startups that make up the portfolio of Innovate Arkansas client companies have taken innovation to new heights in Arkansas, from the potentially groundbreaking solar-cell technology of Picasolar to the e-commerce genius of Acumen Brands.

Now another IA client firm, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences startup Angel Eye Camera Systems, has applied some innovation to the NICU.

Angel Eye enables parents of premies to “be there” even when they can’t be there in person. A high-resolution camera mounted above the incubator provides 24/7 coverage of the babies’ movements, and an audio link enables parents to talk to their babies. Or sing, hum, chant — really, just make a connection.

For parents already dealing with the emotional stress associated with having a preemie and then carrying the added burden of leaving their child behind, miles away and for days if not weeks at a time, AngelEye can help them cope. It’s not a remedy, but certainly a salve.

“Many parents simply aren’t able to be there for a variety of reasons, and this allows them to see their babies,” said Shannon Lewis, neonatal project director at UAMS, former director of the NICU there and an early developer of the Angel Eye system. “They can see their babies breathing and moving, and local families have been able to feel more at peace and go home and recover.”

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In addition to the camera, the AngelEye platform includes chat and instant messaging features. Not only can parents view their babies 24/7 and speak to them through the one-way audio feature, but they can join other family members or friends to chat while viewing their babies.

Angel Eye was the first product of its kind, and UAMS the first hospital to use it. So far, it remains the only Arkansas institution to use the Angel Eye system. Angel Eye’s high-res, 4-D cameras are mounted on 26 of 67 incubators in the UAMS neonatal unit, and CEO Steve Bethel says the goal is to equip them all.

Eventually, he wants the communication to go back and forth between parents at home and the nurses at each unit.

“We’re trying to work out a two-way platform where nurses and families can communicate,” he said.

Angel Eye sells its platform to hospitals that then offer it as a free service to parents of premies. Despite slow going in Arkansas, it can be found in nine NICU units across the country, with eight more deals pending. Hospitals in Texas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, New

York and Massachusetts have purchased the system, and installations are pending at more hospitals in Texas, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Connecticut and Florida. [Browse All »](#)

Some of Angel Eye's more prominent customers include the Texas Health Resources system in that state, Maimonides Infant & Children's Hospital in Brooklyn and Massachusetts General in Boston (pending).

Had Angel Eye been available back in 1999, we would've worn it out with our son, who could fit into the palm of my hand. He's 15 now and finishing up his freshman year, happy and healthy, at Catholic High. But it's easy to appreciate just how meaningful Angel Eye has been for its users. Two testimonials, in particular, speak to the difference it can make for parents of premies:

- "Thank you for providing this resource. It most definitely did ease our anxiety and made us feel comfortable at the end of the day when we could not necessarily say good night to our son in person."
- "We thought this was a wonderful idea. We had it on every second we were not in the NICU. The nurses would even leave little notes for us to wake up and see."

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