

Photographers capture infants' brief lives on film

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MADISON, Ala. (RNS)—For the entire lifetime of his daughter, Joey Karr smiled into her eyes. Then the infant, who couldn't overcome a fatal form of dwarfism, died in his wife's arms as their other three children patted their sister.

Photographer Kelly Clark Baugher caught that lifetime of love in photos—images now sacred with the weight of life and loss that the death of a baby brings.



Joey Karr shares a lifetime of love with his daughter, Janie Beth, after she is unhooked from life support. The family was photographed as part of the Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep project.

(PHOTO/RNS/Courtesy Kelly Clark Baugher)

Baugher is one of a small but devoted number of professional photographers who volunteer their time at hospitals to take pictures of heartbreakingly short-lived joy.

A Colorado-based group, [Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep](#), sends professional photographers—if the families request them—to record their child’s brief life.

“It’s one of the most wonderful things I’ve ever done,” Baugher said as she looked through photos from more than 60 families she and photographer Mary Ellen Pollard have served.

“It’s almost as though time slows down in that room. I will never forget the feeling. I felt God in that room.”

She refers to the hospital rooms where parents sit with an infant that was stillborn or has been disconnected from life support when death has become the kindest option. The photographers stay at the periphery, quietly working without a flash as they record the fleeting moments.

The idea is macabre only for people who haven’t lived through it, said Ken and Amy Salter, who became the parents of twin boys born last fall, one of whom died after months in neonatal intensive care. They agreed to have their last minutes photographed when nurses suggested they call Baugher.

“The photographs are a lasting comfort,” said Amy Salter, who now volunteers as a parent coordinator for Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep. “Yes, it was difficult, but to have pictures, to remember the little smile he makes, his little fuzzy head—it’s priceless.”

{youtube}MlKhrCORF8w{/youtube}

The photographers make a CD of the photographs after they edit the photos, giving parents finished pictures with the calm sheen of magazine shots. Parents can choose to print them or look at them—or not. Many find themselves returning to them often for a quiet space of remembering and weeping, Salter said.

Nurses who have assisted families going through such a wrenching time

have seen how the photos become, later, a source of comfort as people thread the long valley of grief.

“Pictures, as well as clothing, footprints, handprints, stuffed animals and blankets are tangible reminders to these families of the precious little life they have lost,” said Ashley Ray, a nurse in Huntsville, Ala., who works with bereaved parents.

“It is so awesome to be able to offer these families professional photos of their sweet babies.”

For the photographers, it’s a ministry, Mary Ellen Pollard said.

“I had my son two months early, and he is still with us on this side of heaven,” Pollard said. “He spent two months in the NICU. We were told he was not going to survive, but our son went home. Beside us, there was a family whose daughter didn’t. I needed to do something to give back.”

The photographs help to make the lifetime of their daughter real, said Joey and Michelle Karr, who lost their daughter, Janie Beth.

“The one time Janie Beth opened her eyes, Kelly happened to catch that on film. I never even noticed she was taking a picture,” Joey Karr said.

But Baugher noticed the moment when the tiny face peers up at her father from his arms.

“It’s like she looked right into his soul,” Baugher said,

—*Kay Campbell writes for The Huntsville Times in Huntsville, Ala.*