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Sugar Land Mom Creates Handy Device to Keep Babies Snug

BY SARAH GREER OSBORNE

When Yamile Jackson gave birth to her son Zachary in 2001 he weighed one pound 15 ounces. Zachary was twelve weeks premature and spent the first five months of his life in Memorial Hermann Children's Hospital, most of it in the neonatal intensive care unit. To make matters worse, when he was only three weeks old, power failures caused by Tropical Storm Allison shut down his life support machine and he was forced to be transferred to a different hospital. Jackson remembers the event as one of the worst experiences of her life. "I would have to leave him every night because no one was allowed to stay in the neonatal ICU," she recalls. "It was devastating. I remember telling my husband that I wished I could cut my hand off and leave it wrapped around my baby."

Eight years later, Zachary is a happy and healthy 2nd grader and Jackson is a thriving entrepreneur whose experience in the neonatal unit led her to invent a device that is now used in hospitals around the world. "When Zachary was in the NICU, I noticed the nurses would put Beanie Babies or rolled up towels around him and the other babies," she says. "It gave him and the other babies a sense of security and comfort. But it also gave me an idea." Jackson's desire to cut off her hand and leave it wrapped around her son inspired her to transform the metaphor into a reality she calls the *Zaky*. Named after her son, the *Zaky* is a pillow made of soft, pliable, washable fleece that is shaped like a hand and forearm. "When they're in the womb, babies stretch and then return to the fetal position," explains Jackson. "They like the boundary, which is why all newborn babies like to be swaddled. When the *Zaky* is on top of a pre-mature baby, they can still stretch and feel the comfort of a boundary without interfering with all the needles and monitors."

Memorial Hermann doctors and nurses agree; so much so that they have made the *Zaky* a standard item in all their NICU units. Texas Children's Hospital also uses the *Zaky* for its preemie babies and so do 300 other hospitals around the U.S. and the world. "I never dreamed my story and personal experience would affect so many parents and children," she blushes. "If the *Zaky* had helped just one family I would have been happy and thankful."

Jackson, who has a doctorate in industrial engineering, made the first *Zaky* prototype in 2001 from a cotton jersey garden glove filled with pellets from the inside of a Beanie Baby. Now her Sugarland company sells the



item to stores and hospitals in Australia, South Africa, Canada, Israel, the Ukraine and the United States. Here in Houston, the *Zaky* can be purchased at any Baby's First Furniture Store or online at www.zakeez.com. The product retails for \$49.95 and is available in five colors and can be either right or left handed.



In addition to the *Zaky*, Jackson has expanded her company to include a new item called the *Zak Sack*. The *Zak Sack* is kangaroo type pouch that cradles a newborn baby skin to skin with its mother or father. "When Zachary was waiting to be transported to another hospital when his life support was shut down by Allison, I kangarooed him in similar pouch for nine hours until he was evacuated," says Jackson. "I believe it made all the difference." Texas Women's hospital has purchased several hundred of the *Zak*

Sacks for its maternity wing. The device is believed to promote bonding, weight gain and sensory stimulation in newborn babies. For parents it can increase self-confidence, intimacy and a mother's milk supply.

Jackson has won a dozen awards for her both the *Zaky* and *Zak Sack*, including a recent trip to Washington D.C. for recognition as the 2009 SCORE "Woman Owned Small Business of the Year." But she has yet to stop now. Her latest venture includes a line of preemie clothing for babies that weigh between 3 to 5 pounds and burial garments for babies who have passed away and weighed less than seven pounds. "When talking to moms and nurses of premature babies, one of the big things needed is clothing," says Jackson. "Most of the time parents and hospitals rely on volunteers to make preemie clothing, but in today's economy there are less and less volunteers." The clothing line will be called the "*Zak* collection" and will be available on line later this year.