

2026 FCC SCHOLARS: REFLECTIONS

The Family-Centered Care (FCC) Taskforce was delighted to **support 11 FCC Scholars in attending Gravens Conference for the second year in a row**. After supporting five neonatal fellows in 2025, the Taskforce was able to expand its reach and impact to include two Family Partners (former NICU parents engaging in peer support, quality improvement, and research), one early career neonatal nurse, and three early career neonatal therapists in addition to five neonatal fellows.

When Dr. Malathi Balasundaram regularly attended Gravens Conference as early career faculty, her passion for collaborating with families in the care of their infants was sparked and ignited and led her to found the Family-Centered Care Taskforce at the 2022 event. The annual conference has remained significant to her over the years and is where she ultimately met Morgan Kowalski, NICU parent and FCC Taskforce Director of Operations, in 2023 and where they have co-presented FCC-related research and quality improvement work accomplished by the Taskforce ever since.

It has been long recognized that **NICU families enhance conferences** by sharing their lived experience and their unique expertise in supporting research and quality improvement work. While families are often invited to speak and co-present at medical conferences, **they lack the institutional funding necessary to attend**. In an effort to overcome this barrier to parent participation, Malathi and Morgan established a Family Partner fund with support from **Michael Hynan, PhD**, who is not only a giant in the field of neonatology but a NICU father as well. They also secured a Chiesi USA Independent Educational Grant and support from Mead Johnson Nutrition to fund this year's scholarships.

After advertising the FCC Scholars application with their 3,700+ community members, 79 organizational partners (including NICU Parent Network, National Association for Neonatal Nurses, National Association for Neonatal Therapists, and AAP's Trainees and Early Career Neonatologists (TECaN)), and in Neonatology Today, the FCC Taskforce **received over 60 impressive submissions** from applicants across the United States, Canada, India, and Ghana, and engaged a selection committee of 11 multidisciplinary NICU staff and family partners from their Executive and Advisory Councils to blindly review and score applications.

Ultimately, 11 individuals were selected as FCC Scholars with nine invited to attend Gravens Conference in person and two to attend virtually. Support for in-person attendees included event registration, airfare, ground transportation, hotel, meals, etc., up to \$2,000, while support for virtual attendees included event registration. All the FCC Scholars expressed their appreciation to the FCC Taskforce for the opportunity to attend Gravens Conference and to the NICU parents who shared their stories. Below are some reflections on their time at Gravens:



FCC Scholars on First Day of Gravens Conference



Janna Andre

NICU Parent Advisory Committee,
Mount Sinai Hospital
NICU Parent

"I was especially struck by examples of parent collaboration that extended beyond traditional advisory roles and into true partnership, including units where parents train new staff and are included across all unit committees. . . . Parent voice belongs in the spaces where decisions are made that shape the daily reality of families in the NICU. . . . I was also **deeply touched by the conversations about fathers and non-birthing parents**, and the ways they can feel invisible while carrying fear, responsibility, and the pressure to be strong for everyone else. . . . Fathers and non-birthing parents also need to be invited in, reassured, and asked how they are doing. . . . I am grateful to bring these insights back into my work with a renewed commitment to strengthening parent partnership at both the bedside and the systems level, and to helping ensure that every parent feels welcomed, supported, and recognized as essential in their baby's care." **-Janna Andre**

"As both a NICU Family Support Specialist and a former NICU parent, I was deeply moved by the shared commitment of professionals from across the country who are dedicated to improving outcomes for infants and families. **Listening to NICU parents courageously share their journeys of hope, resilience, loss, and healing was one of the most impactful parts of the conference.** Their stories offered a powerful reminder of the lasting effects that trauma can have on families and reinforced the importance of providing compassionate, trauma-informed, family-centered care throughout the NICU journey. Two of my favorite learning experiences were the Support for NICU Fathers and Non-Birthing Parents Workshop. . . and the NICU tour at Beacon Children's Hospital. . . Inspired by what I learned, we are beginning a NICU Literacy Program to encourage early bonding through reading, developing a Just Dads Welcome Kit, and exploring additional ways to intentionally support and include fathers and birth partners throughout the NICU experience. " **-Valicitie Porrata-Rubino**



Valicitie Porrata-Rubino
NICU Family Support Specialist,
The Valley Hospital
NICU Parent



Isabella Massey, BSN, RNC-NIC
Knowledge & Innovation Council Chair
Cooper University Hospital

"What made the Gravens Conference especially meaningful was the **collaboration between every discipline connected to the NICU**: physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, therapists, parents, family partners, architects, scientists, and so many others. **Every voice had a seat at the table, united by a shared commitment to NICU patients and their families.** I left the conference feeling energized and inspired, with countless innovative ideas that I am excited to bring back to my unit. The knowledge I gained, the conversations I had, and the connections I made will continue to shape and strengthen my practice as a NICU nurse for years to come." **-Isabella Massey**

"Whether through positive touch and sensory experiences, such as skin-to-skin care, or supporting parents as they participate in feeding and learn to read their infant's cues, families have a unique and important role in shaping their infant's development. As neonatal therapists, we have an opportunity to move beyond traditional models of care and empower families as confident participants rather than passive observers. The **conversations at Gravens challenged me to reflect on practices that have become routine and ask whether they truly serve infants and families** in the best way possible." **-Kelly Williamson**



Kelly Williamson, M.S. CCC-SLP
Speech-Language Pathologist
Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center



Dana Apkon, MD
Second Year Fellow,
Boston Children's Hospital
at Harvard

"Gravens allowed me to really practice the family-partnered language that I can use and model in the NICU as a front-line provider. I really appreciated hearing from families about what true "partnership" looks like to them, rather than "inclusion." I now actively look and advocate for ways to truly partner — thinking of how to involve families in holding and providing comfort during painful procedures, assessments, and discharge planning. Discussing these practical changes with families and other providers in attendance helped me to think critically about how we can implement these changes on a larger scale as well and to raise the bar of developmental care." **-Dana Apkon**

"One of my biggest reflections was the importance of caring for the whole family throughout the NICU journey, including the often overlooked "fourth trimester." I was struck by the emotional conflict parents face when they need to leave their baby's bedside to care for themselves postpartum, and it reinforced the need for systems that support parents not only as caregivers, but as individuals navigating recovery and uncertainty. I was also **inspired by the creativity around reimagining the NICU experience, including the involvement of architects and designers in creating spaces that better support families.** Discussions around sound protection, sibling inclusion, and NICU design challenged me to think critically about how our environment shapes connection and trust. . . . I leave Gravens motivated to continue questioning traditional practices and helping create NICUs where every family feels welcomed and supported." **-Daphne Darmawan**



Daphne Darmawan, MD, MBS
Third Year Fellow
Stanford Lucile Packard
Children's Hospital



Elizabeth Lee, MD
Second Year Fellow
Johns Hopkins Children's Center

"I will certainly take the lessons I learned from [NICU parent] stories back to my home practice, especially the **importance of intentionally involving NICU dads in care.** One quote that has stayed with me since the conference was the call to action to help infants and families move from surviving to thriving through intentional efforts to improve every aspect of care. . . . I hope to carry the teachings from this conference with me by continuing to work toward improving the experiences of NICU families, finding meaningful ways to involve parent voices in decision-making, and always striving to help our NICU infants and families move from surviving to thriving." **-Elizabeth Lee**

"The lesson I will carry longest is that our impact extends far beyond the NICU walls. The weeks families spend with us shape how parents see themselves, how siblings process experiences they may not have words for yet, and how entire family systems find their footing long after discharge. That means our circle of care has to be wider than the mother-infant dyad we have traditionally centered. It has to include fathers, non-birthing parents, and siblings as equal participants in the story we are helping this family write. The NICU is where a whole family begins to form around a new life, and every member of that family deserves a place in it."

-Trisha Mulmareddy



Trisha Mulmareddy, MD, MPH
First Year Fellow
University of California,
Los Angeles



Kelly MacPherson, MD, MS
First Year Fellow
Women & Infants Hospital,
Brown University

“My second child was born at 33 weeks’ gestation, during my third year of pediatrics residency, and he spent two weeks in the NICU where I am currently completing fellowship training. Since then, I have been trying to find ways to incorporate my personal experience as a NICU parent into my training to better serve my patients and their families. **It was an absolute honor and privilege to learn from the families who shared their inspiring, but often distressing, stories of their neonate’s journey through their early days, weeks and months of life in the ICU.** Their stories reminded me that, as medical providers, we may underestimate the overwhelming amount of mental, physical and emotional stress our birthing parents and their partners and support systems are going through as their little one enters our units. . . . It is our moral obligation to create an inclusive, supportive and informative space while they process their NICU journeys.” **-Kelly MacPherson**

“Despite attending from India, **I felt connected to a global community of clinicians, researchers, educators, and family advocates who share a common commitment to improving neonatal care.** . . . One of the most valuable

lessons I gained was the importance of translating FCC principles into everyday clinical practice. The sessions highlighted practical approaches to strengthening communication, empowering parents as integral members of the care team, and creating healthcare environments where families feel heard, respected, and supported. . . . As a pediatric physiotherapist and researcher, these insights have further strengthened my commitment to advancing Family-Centered Care through clinical practice, education, and

research, with a particular focus on developing culturally appropriate and sustainable FCC initiatives in India. . . . Having recently completed my Ph.D. with a research focus on Family-Centered Care in neonatal practice, this experience has reaffirmed my dedication to improving neonatal outcomes by fostering meaningful partnerships between healthcare professionals and families.” **-Sharath Hullumani**



Sharath Hullumani
Pediatric & Neonatal Physiotherapist
Acharya Vinobhabve Rural Hospital,



Niharika Mathur
Senior Physiotherapist
& PhD Scholar
All India Institute of
Medical Sciences

“**Attending. . . as a Virtual Scholar was quietly transformative.** As a neonatal therapist and PhD scholar, I came with the lived experience of an Indian NICU - its pace, its families, its complexities. Gravens. . . pushed me to think more intentionally about clustering care around the infant's neurodevelopmental needs and moving from informing families to truly partnering with them. Most significantly, it challenged how I think about who belongs in the NICU. In India, mothers carry the weight of infant care while fathers wait outside - present in the crisis, absent from the care. This is not a cultural inevitability; it is a gap. Involved fathers report stronger attachment, lower anxiety, and greater caregiving confidence. There is no clinical reason to leave them at the door - only habit, and habit can change. **Gravens also sparked something really important-**

the need for peer support among NICU families. . . . A parents' group where one family's experience becomes another's anchor offers what no protocol can - the comfort of shared survival. In a setting where mental health support is scarce, this may be the most human and accessible intervention we can build. . . . I left with better questions than I arrived with - and that, in itself, felt like enough.” **-Niharika Mathur**

Thank you to the **Michael Hynan Fund** and those webinar speakers who donated their honoraria over the last year to make two Family Partner scholarships possible. Thank you to **Chiesi USA** for their independent educational grant which supported eight scholarships, and to **Mead Johnson Nutrition** who provided support for one FCC Scholar. We also sincerely appreciate our selection committee for their time, support, and discernment:



Malathi Balasundaram, MD, Jessi Barnes, MSN, RN, RNC-NIC, NPD-BC, NICU Parent, Latoya Blueford, NICU Parent, Sahra Cahoon, NICU Parent, Jessica Fry, MD



Mitchell Goldstein, MD, Morgan Kowalski, NICU Parent, Ramya Kumar, MS, CCC-SLP, BCSS, CNT, IBCLC, NTMTC, SBCS, Katrina Moline, NICU Parent, Vincent Smith, MD, MPH, Keira Sorrells, NICU Parent



FCC Taskforce Leadership Team, Executive & Advisory Council Members, and FCC Scholars

For more free educational opportunities from the FCC Taskforce, join our free membership!

