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# VeroBeach

## Magazine®

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*This VBHS teen is*

## Galloping to Glory





BY JEFFREY R.  
PICKERING

# Fortifying Families

NOTHING SAYS 'I LOVE YOU' LIKE A HEALTHY START

I will never forget the day my wife and I learned that she was pregnant with our third child. It was a cold, gray December morning—Stephanie's 41st birthday—and it had been several months since we had stopped fertility treatment.

We were living in Bakersfield, California, where I was serving as CEO of the local community foundation, and Stephanie was working for The California Endowment. Stephanie had not been feeling well, so I drove our two chil-



The Indian River Healthy Start Coalition offers birthing classes and other educational resources.



## HEALTHY START COALITION

According to Andrea Berry, CEO of Indian River County Healthy Start Coalition, the 30-year-old organization's programs are embedded in local prenatal care offices. "If you have had a baby in Indian River County, you have most likely been touched by Healthy Start."

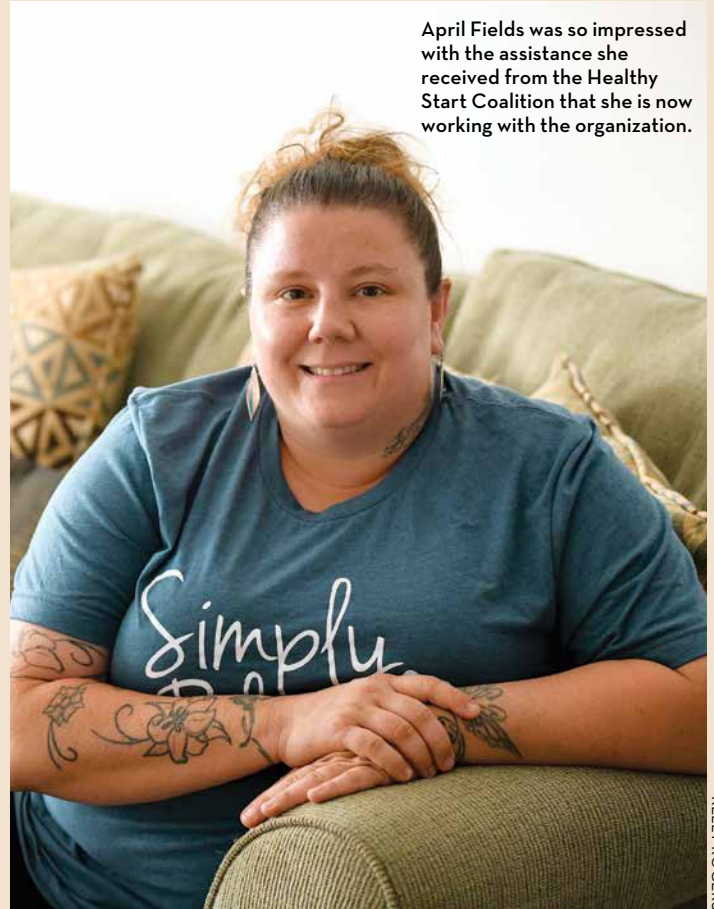
April Fields can attest to that. She participated in the "Parents as Teachers" program, which supports families for the first three years of a child's life, both times she gave birth.

"They made it so easy," Fields remembers. "The counselor came to your home on your schedule, so you didn't have to pack up the kids and take them somewhere."

Bridgette Jerger, Fields' counselor with both children, shared information about topics such as motor skill development, growth milestones and more. "She taught me things I could do with the kids on my own to help them learn, using items I already had around the house," Fields notes. Perhaps most importantly, they helped allay the fears she had as a new mother and helped her gain confidence in her parenting skills. "They helped me know my kids were doing okay," she says.

In addition to home visits, help is available to parents needing items such as diapers and wipes or gently used clothing and toys. "They aren't just another organization," Fields emphasizes. "It's a group of people who will become like your new best friends—if you need help, they will help you."

Fields was so grateful for the help she received that she has since completed Healthy Start's doula certification program and is now working to support other new families as they navigate the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth, and giving their children a healthy start.



April Fields was so impressed with the assistance she received from the Healthy Start Coalition that she is now working with the organization.

KELLY ROGERS

dren, Colin and Olivia, to their elementary school while she rested. A thick tulle fog covered the ground, obscuring the rows of table grape vines and pumpjacks that lined the road. The air felt heavy and expectant.

About the time I was dropping the children off at school, Stephanie followed a hunch about her fatigue and upset stomach and took an at-home pregnancy test. It was positive. She took another, which produced the same result.

Her first call was to her father, Dr. Marvin

**"They aren't just another organization. It's a group of people who will become like your new best friends."**

— APRIL FIELDS

Brooks, a veteran urologist who had founded the Eisenhower Medical Center in Palm Springs 40 years prior. He was

entering the final stage of a years-long fight with cancer. Everyone had been praying for a miracle and, while not the

cure to his disease, this news fit the bill.

"Daddy, we're going to have a baby," Stephanie proclaimed through the phone. Her father's deep baritone response of delight summoned my mother-in-law from the other room. Speaker-phone happiness ensued, along with a promise to keep the secret until I got home from work.

By lunchtime, Stephanie could not wait any longer. With a bag of saltines and a can of Sprite, she made the drive downtown and

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## Every year, the Healthy Start Coalition provides a helping hand to hundreds of mothers, babies and families in our community.

strode into my office with the sweetest smile on her face. She closed the door and said “I have something to tell you,” and then handed me the pregnancy tests. “We’re having a baby,” she exclaimed. We hugged, I cried. It was a miracle.

The decision to try and have a child together was a family affair that began in 2010, shortly after our wedding and Stephanie’s subsequent adoption of my children, Colin and Olivia, who were 6 and 5 years old at the time. It had been several years since my first wife passed away, and my children welcomed Stephanie with open arms. The news of a new baby made us complete, and the next nine months were filled with much anticipation and excitement.

By June 2013, my father-in-law’s cancer had taken a turn for the worse. Stephanie rushed to his bedside and convinced the nurse to

smuggle in an ultrasound machine so Marvin could “meet” the baby. When the image appeared, Marvin smiled and commented on the baby’s male anatomy. Once a urologist always a urologist, I guess.

“We are going to name him Grant ... like a gift ... from you,” Stephanie said.

Marvin responded, “He’s a gift from God.”

Marvin died on June 30, 2013, a little more than a month before Grant’s birth. Despite our deep sadness, Grant’s arrival and the subsequent activity of his first year of life made the grieving process much easier. So did the support we received from an army of family, friends, doctors, nurses, colleagues and caregivers. All were part of a healthy start to life for Grant and our growing family as we eventually made our way to Vero Beach.

As I look back on the experience of Stephanie’s

pregnancy, Grant’s birth, and his first two years of life, I am extremely grateful for the support we all received. I could not imagine what those years would have been like without it. Perhaps it is the proximity to the event or simply the recognition that we could not have made it on our own that makes me appreciate the work of Indian River County’s Healthy Start Coalition and what they do for our new hometown community even more.

Every year, the Healthy Start Coalition provides a helping hand to hundreds of mothers, babies and families in our community. Services range from prenatal support to birthing classes to educational assistance to help parents succeed as their baby’s first teachers. Much of the credit for the 75% of Indian River County mothers receiving prenatal care in their first-trimester and the more than 50% decline in

the infant mortality rate over the last decade goes to the important work being carried out by this organization.

Indian River Community Foundation is proud to support the Healthy Start Coalition with regular grants for programs that help at-risk mothers have healthy babies. In addition, the organization is a participant in the Community Foundation’s Endowment Partners Program, which helps strengthen and sustain these important programs for generations to come.

To learn more about how you can support Indian River County Healthy Start Coalition by making a charitable contribution or a planned gift from your estate, visit [www.irchealthystartcoalition.org](http://www.irchealthystartcoalition.org). For every mother, every baby and every family in Indian River County, the Healthy Start Coalition is that helping hand. ☺