



Michaela and Emily Kelly visited the neonatal intensive care unit on Monday, 18 years after they were treated there. Their family donated to the campaign for major upgrades to the unit through the Rally of Hope in 2009. Now the Kelly sisters are receiving scholarships from the Saint John Regional Hospital Foundation.

PHOTO: APRIL CUNNINGHAM/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

# 'The Yelly Kellys are back'

APRIL CUNNINGHAM  
TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

**SAINT JOHN** • Through every one of the 113 days that Sharon Kelly spent in hospital with her twin premature babies 18 years ago, she worried about every detail of their tiny lives.

Every ounce and every breath mattered.

"As a mom, you think, 'Is there going to be setbacks? Will they have learning disabilities?'" Kelly says, recalling the difficult early days after she gave birth to the girls 3½ months early.

Now, twin sisters Michaela and Emily Kelly of Hampton are high honours students in near-perfect health, on their way to New Brunswick Community College's practical nursing program next month.

And in a serendipitous twist, the sisters are benefiting from the same organization their family donated to after their experience with the Saint John Regional Hospital's neonatal unit in 1997.

The Kelly sisters, now 18, are two of 11 scholarship recipients from MindCare New Brunswick, a mental wellness committee tied to the Saint John Regional Hospital Foundation. They will each receive \$2,000.

"It's just so special. You can't have anything that's come more full circle than this," said Jeff McAloon, president and CEO of the hospital foundation.

"The fact the girls spent the first four months of their life here, their family contributed in a really meaningful way to the campaign, and now they're the recipients of MindCare support, it's just the perfect example of the power of local philanthropy."

Foundation officials had no idea the



Emily Kelly was one of a set of twins born 14 weeks premature in 1997. PHOTO: SUBMITTED



Michaela Kelly was one of a set of twins born 14 weeks premature in 1997. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

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## Brother Liam was also born premature, spent time in neonatal intensive care

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twins were former neonatal patients until they recently stumbled upon their names from a donor wall commemorating contributors to the 2009 Rally of Hope.

"It was totally random," McAloon said.

On Monday, the twins visited the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit, which underwent a major renovation in 2012, with \$1.6 million of the funding coming from the hospital foundation and its donors, including the Kellys.

"The Yelly Kellys are back," said Michaela with a laugh, referencing their preemie nicknames, as they chatted with some of the same nurses who cared for them after their birth.

The unit, which used to be separated by curtains, now has specialized equipment and separate patient care rooms and hostel rooms for mothers who must stay in hospital.

"I think it's amazing," Sharon Kelly said, looking at the pristine unit and bassinets holding tiny, pink newborns.



Despite being born 3½ months premature, Emily and Michaela Kelly only had minor health concerns growing up. PHOTO: APRIL CUNNINGHAM/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

"Without them and constant updating, the nurses couldn't do what they do." That's what drove Sharon Kelly and

her husband, Michael Kelly, to donate six years ago. Their son Liam, 14, was also born premature and spent time in

neonatal intensive care. He was born at 35 weeks – five weeks early – while his sisters were born at 26 weeks, or 14 weeks early.

Sharon remembers the day she went into labour with the twins. She was chatting with her neighbour who was planting flowers in window boxes when she started feeling intense back pain. After calling the brand new TeleCare, she was advised to come to the hospital.

Her babies were born a short time later, each weighing slightly more than two pounds.

"I was in shock," she said on Monday, recalling those early moments.

"It was hard right after delivering not being able to hold them. I kind of felt like they weren't my babies at first."

The closest call came when Michaela contracted neonatal meningitis, a potentially fatal condition, a little more than two months after birth. Emily tested positive for the same 10 days later, but since it was caught early, she was not as sick.

"They're miracles, they really are,"

their mother said.

Growing up, the sisters only had minor health concerns, including frequent ear infections. They also have mild, seasonal asthma, likely linked to their premature births.

The twins are active, curling, playing soccer and volunteering at a seniors centre.

They said the fact they were born premature really had no impact on their decision to enter a career in health care.

"We were just going to the open houses, and we liked the people up there," Michaela said, pointing at the NBCC Allied Health Centre, located next to the hospital.

"We seem to do everything together," Emily added.

The pair will continue to live at home in Hampton while attending school, which may make the transition a little easier, especially for their mother.

"It's nice to see them spread their wings and grow a little and see what the future holds," she said.

"It's hard to picture. They're my little babies."