

THE POST-STANDARD Sunday

ONEIDA COUNTY

‘He was so tiny he didn’t look like he could sustain himself’



Riverstone Halbritter nearly died when he was born, but the son of Oneida Nation leader Ray Halbritter survived thanks to Crouse Health Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. The Halbritters are featured in an ad campaign for the unit. N. Scott Trimble, strimble@syracuse.com

Ray and Renee Halbritter share the story of their son, who was born prematurely

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Their baby boy weighed slightly more than 2 pounds at birth and measured just 13 inches.

Born at 26 weeks (3.5 months early), he was so tiny and fragile that his parents, Oneida Nation CEO Ray Halbritter and his wife, Renee, were not sure he would make it. At first, they couldn’t even touch their son.

Four days after his birth, Renee was released from Crouse Hospital, but her infant had to stay. A nurse told her it was now OK to kiss her son, whom they had named Riverstone Reign Halbritter.

“Where?” she asked, studying the tangle of wires, IVs and monitors attached to his tiny little body.

“On his head,” the nurse answered. Renee gently kissed him.

“I just lost it after that,” she said. “I cried the whole way home.”

Riverstone spent 105 days in Crouse Hospital’s Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, NICU for short. The Halbritters had to take it one day a time, never knowing if their young son would ever make it home.

Ray and Renee Halbritter recently sat down with The Post-Standard to share the

story of their baby’s premature birth last January and his fight to live. They recently appeared in an advertising campaign for Crouse’s NICU.

“They saved our baby’s life,” Renee said of the staff at Crouse.

Ray recalled that when they first saw their baby he “was just so small and almost unrecognizable as a baby.”

“He was so tiny. I was cautiously thrilled, but it didn’t look good to me,” he said. “I really didn’t think at first he was going to make it.”

GET TO THE HOSPITAL, NOW

Renee was not quite six months pregnant when she began experiencing problems. She had bleeding and cramping and went to the doctor, who told her to take it easy. They told her the worst-case scenario was a placental abruption (the placenta separates from the uterus wall), which she didn’t have, so she was good.

Several days later, as she landed at the Syracuse airport after a trip with Ray to

SEE RIVERSTONE, A12

Origins of Riverstone Reign Halbritter’s name

The couple picked River because they wanted nature to be part of his name. Stone is Renee’s maiden name, the couple met at Turning Stone and the Oneida Indians are the People of the Standing Stone.

And they picked Reign because they want the Lord to always reign in Riverstone’s life.

Elijah Hughes wills SU to just short of win. C1

Tubman portrait taken in Auburn up for auction. 11

SYRACUSE

City looks to tweak rules for food trucks

Restaurants complained about lost lunch revenues

Jacob Pucci jpucci@syracuse.com

Your summertime lunch plans in downtown Syracuse might be in for a big change this year.

Changes to city policy in 2018 allowed for a resurgence of food trucks in downtown Syracuse in 2019, but additional changes, including to the popular Clinton Square food truck rally that started on the heels of the new legislation, may be on the horizon for 2020.

No changes are official yet, but the Syracuse Common Council is expected to vote, perhaps as early as March, on changes to food truck regulations, which could mean moving the food truck rally out of Clinton Square exclusively and to a rotating set of spots in and around downtown Syracuse, a selection of places which too could grow in the year ahead.

That’s one potential compromise in a long-simmering dispute between brick-and-mortar restaurant and food truck owners found in Syracuse and cities across the country.

Nick Sanford, owner of Toss & Fire Wood-Fired Pizza in North Syracuse, which operates both a brick-and-mortar restaurant and a food truck, is the president of the Syracuse Food Truck Association. A group of about two dozen food trucks in Central New York, the association organizes the Clinton Square rally.

Sanford said he thought the upcoming 21-week slate, which would span from end of April through September, with weeks off for Taste of Syracuse and the New York State Blues Festival, was set.

He said the association received an invoice from the city for its street closing permit. The cost of that permit essentially

SEE CITY OFFICIAL, A18



MEDALLION HUNT

Want to win \$2,000?

Just solve the clues, find the medallion and cash in! Winterfest Treasure Hunt has begun. Find today’s clue: A20

Lottery, A2 Obituaries, B4 Sports, C1 Local/Biz, D1 Commentary, E1 Careers/Auto, F1 Homes, H1 CNY, I1 Today’s weather: Light snow. High: 38. Low: 28. A2



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THE POST-STANDARD



About Crouse Hospitals Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

- ▶ The Baker Regional Neonatal Intensive Care Unit is located on the ninth floor of Crouse Hospital's Irving unit in Syracuse.
- ▶ The facility houses 57 isolettes where more than 900 critically ill and premature infants receive treatment each year.
- ▶ Crouse is the Regional Perinatal Center for the region, working with the state Department of Health and 18 affiliate hospitals to promote healthy outcomes for women and children within the region's 14 counties. The region spans from St. Lawrence County in Northern New York to Broome and Tioga counties in the Southern Tier.
- ▶ An average of 70% of the neonates are born at Crouse, but about 30% of NICU babies are transported by the Crouse NICU team from the affiliated birthing hospitals throughout the region.

Crouse Hospital

Riverstone Harbriter is held by his mother in his father's office in Turning Stone Resort Casino.

Photos by N. Scott Trimble, stribble@syracuse.com

Riverstone is healthy, but still faces some challenges

FROM A1

Aspen, she called the doctor explaining that her bleeding and cramps were worse. They told her to drive to Crouse Hospital immediately. She asked if she could go home first and come in the morning, and was told no: Come right away.

At the hospital, she was given the bad news: She had a placental abruption, the worst-case scenario.

The condition can decrease or block the baby's supply of oxygen and nutrients and cause heavy bleeding in the mother. Left untreated, the baby and mother could die.

"It was scary," Renee recalled.

The NICU director came and talked to the couple. Renee, who is in her early 40s, was told if she could wait three more weeks to have the baby, until she was at 28 weeks, it would be much safer for the newborn. Renee said she was prepared to lay still in the hospital for as long as it took.

Days later, Renee said she was having contractions every 90 seconds for 12 hours at a time. She wasn't allowed to eat or drink because they knew they'd have to operate soon, so she was miserable and ready to deliver.

"I had this really sharp, shooting pain on my left side, and they said that was stressing the baby, so they pushed code blue and within 10 minutes he was born," said the first-time mother.

Riverstone was born by emergency C-section, just six days after Renee had been admitted to the hospital.

"He came out crying, so they were very impressed at that, because his lungs were underdeveloped," she said.

He was born at 10:13 p.m. Jan. 9. The Halbritters wouldn't see their child until 4 a.m.

"He was so, so tiny — the size of a ruler — and he was all black and blue and had all these tubes on him," Renee recalled. "He had ointment all over his skin and he was under these lights."

"I fell in love with him before I even saw him," she said.

Ray recalls being speechless when he first saw Riverstone. It was even harder because the tiny guy had the hiccups and his whole tummy was retracting fiercely, Renee recalled.

"He was so tiny he didn't look like he could sustain himself," Ray said. "I was very concerned about him being able to survive. Those early days were just about keeping your fingers crossed every day that he would survive."

LEAVING HIM AT THE HOSPITAL SO HARD

At home at night — with their baby still back at the hospital — the Halbritters worried.

The NICU staff said they could call anytime they were concerned about Riverstone and how he was doing. And they did call, sometimes at 3 or 4 a.m. The nurses would patiently answer their questions, they said.

At the hospital, alarms would go off on their son every day, Ray said.

"We were asking, 'What's the matter?'" and they'd say his heart rate dropped, but it's OK, it happens," he said. "They explained everything and anticipated our fears."

Ray said he and Renee often didn't know how serious something was.

"We'd be wondering is this the last moments?" he said. "And we'd see these blips on the screen, and the IVs and they're taking his blood. It's really hard to describe."

Renee, frequently accompanied by Ray, drove an hour every day to the hospital to spend as much time with their son as they could.

After eight days, the Halbritters were allowed to hold their son for an hour a day. It took Ray, 69 and the father of seven other children, several weeks before he felt confident enough to hold the tiny baby.

The hospital encouraged skin-to-skin contact with mom and baby. Renee said she cherished that hour each day. Some days, the hospital would tell them the baby's oxygen levels had dropped and he'd had a rough night, so they could see him but not touch him that day.



See the video

Renee and Ray Halbriter speak about the care their son, Riverstone, received at Crouse Hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. See the video at tinurl.com/halbriter-video.

"We'd get there and he would just lie so still, and not be active like other days. I'd cry all day, worrying."

Renee Halbriter

"We'd get there and he would just lie so still, and not be active like other days," Renee recalled. "I'd cry all day, worrying."

ALMOST HOME, THEN A SETBACK

As time went on, Riverstone began to improve. He was close to going home, but first he needed to be vaccinated, Renee said.

It was 6 p.m. on a Sunday, and Renee said she hesitated before signing the papers for the vaccinations. He was still so tiny and vulnerable, she said, but she reluctantly agreed.

That night, the NICU called the Halbritters at home. Riverstone wasn't breathing. They had to intubate him with a tube to open up an airway for the first time since his birth.

"That was probably the scariest yet," Renee said. "I went to see him, but I hated to see him that way. It had been so promising before that."

For four days, Riverstone couldn't breathe on his own, and was so swollen that he didn't look like himself, the couple said. He was diagnosed with BPD, bronchopulmonary dysplasia, a lung condition that can develop in infants who need help breathing in the early days of life.

The Halbritters would pray at the hospital for their son, and the nurses would hold hands with them and join them in prayer. The couple said that meant so much to both of them. Slowly, Riverstone began to recover.

Attempts to get him off the oxygen before he was released didn't work, so he was discharged April 24 with oxygen and a monitor. Ray described those first nights at home as nerve-wracking.

"We're not nurses or physicians, and here is our son on oxygen and all monitored up," he said. "There is an alarm system, which goes off all the time."

They would wake up and wonder: Is he OK?

"It was just really challenging," he said. "We would pick him up, stimulate him to make sure he was breathing and make sure his heart was beating."

Riverstone also had terrible acid reflux from the feeding tube he had in the hospital, his parents said.

'HE IS THE JOY OF OUR LIFE'

Today, Riverstone weighs 18½ pounds and the couple can breathe a collective sigh of relief. They took turns holding him during the interview in Ray Halbriter's Turning Stone Casino office.

Riverstone was alert and active, bouncing and grabbing his mom's hair. While his developmental stages are measured in terms of his due date rather than his actual birthday, he's doing great, they said.

"He is killing it," his mom said.

He has six teeth, sleeps through the night (although he takes three naps daily) and is bubbly, his parents said. He isn't yet crawling, but the Halbritters have been told that's not unusual for a preemie.

He is still at risk. He has an inhaler and he gets an RSV shot every month to protect him. (RSV, or respiratory syncytial virus, causes infections of the lungs and respiratory tract and is common during cold and flu season.)

The Halbritters keep their son away from anyone who might be ill and try not to have people touch his hands. At Christmas, when they had children over to their home, he was kept in his nursery for his safety.

"It's hard because people want to come up and touch his hands, and we don't want them to, because he puts his hands in his mouth," Ray said.

His stroller has a sign that warns people to keep their distance "as your germs are too big for me," it says.

Proud parents report Riverstone is starting to eat table food. He loves carrots and noodles and, his favorite, avocado.

Once when Riverstone was crying, Ray offered him a taste of avocado, and he loved it. Now he has it every night.

The Halbritters say their son's recovery is amazing, and they credit the Crouse NICU.

"Their affection and comfort meant so much to us," Ray said. "There is no facility better, and they are like family to us now."

Renee beams as she holds her wriggling little boy, and Ray smiles at both of them.

"He is the joy of our life," Renee said.