

MOM N'KENGE

In May of 2019, N'Kenge left work early because she wasn't feeling well. She made it to the Plano, Texas train station, but before she could get home, she discovered she was having contractions. At 24 weeks pregnant, N'Kenge was in labor and was quickly transported to Medical City Plano Hospital.

"A team of doctors rushed me down the hospital hallway and I got really scared when I heard them shout 'code red!'" remembers N'Kenge.

She was rushed into an emergency cesarean section (C-section) too quickly for her family or friends to get there in time to support her. "It was like I blinked and the next thing I knew I had delivered the baby and she went straight into the NICU (newborn intensive care unit)," she said. N'Kenge's daughter, named Zendayah, was born weighing 1 pound and 6 ounces.

While doctors were concerned about N'Kenge's health after childbirth, all N'Kenge was worried about was the health of her newborn. "They told me my child was in jeopardy and that she may never be able to communicate," N'Kenge said. That wasn't the only reason she was scared. She lost a child during a premature birth six years earlier – also at 24 weeks.



NFP mom, N'Kenge, visited her daughter, Zendayah, in the NICU for four months after she was born prematurely.

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Then, nurse Chelsea from Nurse-Family Partnership® (NFP) at WiNGS Dallas received a panicked phone call from N'Kenge. "N'Kenge had an enrollment visit scheduled but we had not had it yet. She told me Zendayah was born early and asked if I could still enroll her in Nurse-Family Partnership," said Chelsea. "Nurse Chelsea called me back within five minutes to tell me she received instant approval to enroll me – and I cried," said N'Kenge.

What came next was a series of challenges that N'Kenge navigated with the support of NFP nurse Chelsea. Zendayah was in the NICU for four months, and N'Kenge wanted to be with her as much as possible. However, she didn't have transportation and she was still recovering from her C-section. N'Kenge had a wheelchair donated to her and nurse Chelsea assisted her with accessing Medicaid to receive free transportation to the NICU.

The free transportation proved helpful in N'Kenge's ability to pump breastmilk. "I told Chelsea I was having problems producing milk at home. She recommended I pump while visiting Zendayah in the NICU. I wasn't allowed to touch her, but I would play African baby tunes while I pumped in the room with her and that bonded us," said N'Kenge.

Chelsea visited N'Kenge to prepare her for the homecoming of her daughter. "When Zendayah came home, Chelsea told me to take our time getting use to each other," remembers N'Kenge. "It took about a month – then Zendayah was glued to me!"



N'KENGE IS PROOF IN THE NFP MODEL THAT AFFIRMS 'ONLY ONE SMALL CHANGE IS NECESSARY.'

- NFP NURSE CHELSEA

When Zendayah was five months old, N'Kenge talked with Chelsea about wanting to communicate with her daughter. "Nurse Chelsea mentioned I should try sign language. I learned the signs for 'milk' and 'mama' and soon Zendayah signed them back! Now she can sign over 30 American Sign Language (ASL) signs," says N'Kenge.

Nurse Chelsea said, "When N'Kenge asked me about communicating with Zendayah, I passed along ASL resources. N'Kenge is proof in the NFP model that affirms 'only one small change is necessary.'"

Later in N'Kenge's journey as a new mom, nurse Chelsea connected her with a new nurse who would help her throughout her daughter's next year. Nurse Chelsea was moving out of the area and wanted to offer another NFP nurse the privilege to know N'Kenge.

Nurse Chelsea introduced N'Kenge to nurse Evie. "N'Kenge was a dream patient that every nurse



NFP mom and Parent Ambassador, N'Kenge, with her children, Zendayah and Za'Heer.



N'Kenge utilized American Sign Language (ASL) resources from her NFP nurse to teach her daughter, Zendayah, how to communicate through signing.

would want. She was engaged with the NFP program and was incredibly resourceful," said Evie. "The first thing we worked on was getting Zendayah into a speech and swallow evaluation."

When N'Kenge graduated from NFP in 2021, she was also nearing the birth of her son, Za'Heer, whom she delivered after a healthy 38-week pregnancy. "Once I got past 24 weeks it was like I was a first-time mom – I had so many questions for nurse Evie!" N'Kenge said.

Zendayah continues to learn through physical therapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy. While Zendayah is able to talk, she is more confident in communicating through sign language. N'Kenge plans to get Zendayah enrolled in Montessori preschool that offers sign language instruction.

N'Kenge now represents NFP as a Parent Ambassador – at the encouragement of nurse Evie. Parent Ambassadors serve as advocates for NFP families nationwide. N'Kenge said, "I want to share my story to encourage others that their circumstances don't determine their future, their mind state does." N'Kenge has future hopes of directing a nonprofit foundation to offer help to moms and their children in the Dallas area. "I have a lot of dreams and aspirations," she said.