The Vision of CHRISTUS Health, a Catholic, faith-based ministry, is to be a leader and advocate in a Catholic, faith-based ministry, creating exemplary health care services, and structures that improve the health of individuals and of local and global communities so all may experience God’s healing presence and love.” That Vision is nowhere more apparent in the CHRISTUS St. Michael environment than in its attention to the youngest among us. February 2009 marked one of whom would have been transferred to other facilities. That means 45 families have been able to return to their hometown to practice their medical specialty—neonatology. Neonatologists specialize in the care of newborn babies, sick babies and premature babies. Typically, their efforts require not only a sophisticated space but also staffing dedicated to the care of newborns with medical challenges. According to Francine Francis, Director of Marketing and Communications for CHRISTUS St. Michael, over 80 babies have been cared for in the Special Care Nursery since its opening, 45 of nutrition or medicine. The infant’s normal respirations, temperature, heart rate, nutritional intake, and behavior are all factors that are closely monitored. Early detection allows for intervention and necessary changes in the baby’s care. In addition, the NICU is equipped with sophisticated monitoring equipment and highly trained neonatal nurses to provide care 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Kathy Beaman, RN, neonatal nurses provide care to identify infant heart problems. Specialized IV pumps deliver small amounts of nutrition or medicine. The world of this neonatologist is a well-equipped, miniature world prepared to identify and treat “big folks’ problems” for the newborn among us. Few hospitals are able to offer the kind of care available through this CHRISTUS St. Michael NICU.

For that reason, doctors and hospitals throughout the area depend on Dr. Keeney and the NICU, over which she presides. In fact, such a facility was not even possible until the Texarkana Metropolitan Area and the Four States Region began to grow. The numbers now indicate close to 600,000 people in the hospital’s service area; therefore, CHRISTUS St. Michael Health System and LifeNet recently purchased an incubator which will enable babies to be safely transported to the NICU at CHRISTUS St. Michael. Increased population figures also made it possible for Susan Keeney, a Texas High School graduate, to return to Texarkana. Susan had her eye on a career in pediatrics, to return to her hometown to practice. She was able to stay near home rather than be transferred to the NICU at CHRISTUS St. Michael. ‘It’s wonderful to be back in Texarkana. Some things are the same, but there are also lots of changes. I am so honored and excited to be able to provide this service. I anticipate a growing level of service and expanding and increasing our level of care.’… And she’s right. According to Francine Francis, “The NICU will include specialized beds called Giraffe Omni beds, which are state-of-the-art beds that convert for the different needs of the newborn.”

This revelation and choice on Dr. Keeney’s part, according to several studies, deserves lots of credit for physicians choosing to add at least three years of neonatology fellowship to their already extended medical studies. Many responses sound like this report from Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Southern California: “Neonatology is fun because the babies are so resilient! Given the right kind of support, they can snap back from almost anything in an amazingly short time. They are so much smarter and more complicated than most people give them credit for, too. Even a premature baby already has a distinct personality and style when they are born. Some babies are ‘easy,’ some are ‘irritable,’ some are ‘social,’ and this is easily recognized as still being their style years later.” One of the greatest rewards of this practice, both Keeney and Beaman admit, occurs when once-sick babies return to say a healthy “Hi” and “Thank-you.”

Another plus to the practice of neonatology is that it is one of the few areas of medicine which allows the physician to handle nearly all aspects of the patient’s care and to become well acquainted with the patient’s family. Sick babies often remain hospitalized for months, and parents are included in the treatment of their babies. As Dr. Keeney showed ALT staff around the Special Care Unit, she introduced us to a mother rocking her little one. The baby and
mom had become familiar to all the hospital personnel as the little one added pounds and worked on breathing. In recent months, the well-baby and NICU nurseries were crowded by newborn triplets and two sets of twins as well as single babies and their loved ones. “You get connected to these families,” Kathy admits. (The smallest baby cared for in CHRISTUS St. Michael’s Special Care Unit had a birth weight of less than 2 lbs. and was not much larger than a 20 ounce coke bottle.) “And last but not least, neonatology is fun because all the other people in an NICU are so great to be around.”

The people for whom this environment is a fit tend to be even-tempered, kind, and friendly; they are also smart, quick thinking and work well as a team. As Dr. Keeney and Kathy agree. “It is truly an honor to work with everybody.” As one can well imagine, a Neonatologist faces many issues familiar to older patients: end of life issues (the ultimate decision always rests with the family) or the very high cost of intensive care (“What you get is a baby who has a whole life ahead,” Dr. Keeney emphasizes.) The “million dollar baby” issue (as Business Week calls it) is becoming more substantial with the concerns about rising health care costs and the rise in the number of premature infants. Fertility drugs appear to be a major cause of this rise which can be addressed through effective and less-expensive pre-natal care. Dr. Keeney praises the cooperation among OB/Gyn physicians, pediatrics and support services like respiratory, radiology, laboratory, physical medicine and pharmacy in making such specialized care available to the people of the Texarkana region.

“The NICU is a substantial investment,” Francis notes, “but it is addressing a community need. Our unit helps families reduce their costs, especially out of town expenses as well as the emotional toll.” Certainly improving local communities is a goal of the CHRISTUS St. Michael Health System. The community has the opportunity not only to benefit from the services of the NICU but also to contribute to them. Francis provides this reminder, “Funds from CHRISTUS St. Michael Friends of the Foundation’s 20th annual duck event, which will be called the Great Texarkana Duck Paddle this year, will benefit the NICU. The Great Texarkana Duck Paddle will be held on Saturday, October 3, 2009, at Spring Lake Park. Everyone can adopt a duck, enjoy the race, and support the NICU—truly a worthwhile investment.

For now, citizens of Texarkana and the surrounding area can join with the many new parents benefiting from the expert attentions of Dr. Susan Keeney and her NICU team. Indeed, the Four States Area can be grateful to CHRISTUS St. Michael for their determination to live up to their Vision. They ARE “creating exemplary health care services, processes, and structures that improve the health of individuals and of local and global communities…” and they do continue to attract talented doctors and nurses and technical folks—all of whom contribute to an improved quality of life for the area’s citizens—older and younger.