

INSIDE:

- BEST FED BEGINNINGS
- TAI CHI AT LAKESIDE CENTER



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MOTHER'S MILK

Best Fed Beginnings offers lactation counseling, donation drop-off depot

Lactation consultant Kara Michael says Beaumont was long “overdue” for a business like hers, but now she is open, accepting clients and “delivering” vital services to new mothers and babies.

Michael, who is a nurse in Beaumont Baptist Hospital’s Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and an international board certified lactation consultant, opened the doors to Best Fed Beginnings on Feb. 21 to assist new mothers breastfeeding babies. She identifies tongue and lip ties in infants with feeding difficulties, offers community

breastfeeding classes and provides individual lactation consultations. The business, located at 6755 Phelan Blvd., Ste. D, in Beaumont, also serves as a donation drop-off depot for the Mother’s Milk Bank at Austin (MMBA), a nonprofit donor milk bank serving 200 hospitals nationwide. It is the first MMBA donation depot in Southeast Texas. Previously, moms had to drive all the way to Houston to donate breast milk or ship it to Austin. The depot will make it easier for local moms to donate their extra expressed breast milk,

which can be lifesaving for fragile, sick or premature babies.

“Every year in the U.S., 72,000 babies are born premature or sick, putting them at risk of a serious and often fatal condition called Necrotizing Enterocolitis (NEC),” said MMBA Executive Director Kim Updegrave. “Breast milk is the proven best food for all babies, and also decreases NEC risk by 75 percent for very tiny premature infants.”

Premature birth and its complications are the largest contributors to infant death in the U.S., and a major cause of long-term health problems in children who survive. Texas’ preterm birth rate is 10.6 percent and has been on the rise since 2016. The preterm birth rate among minorities is even higher, up to 39 percent greater.

Premature infants spend their first weeks or months in hospitals’ neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) where they receive special care and treatments. According to Updegrave, hospitals in Beaumont are committed to making donor human milk available for fragile babies when the mothers’ own milk is unavailable, and now, thanks to Best Fed Beginnings, lactating women in the community can help make sure that the supply of milk doesn’t run dry. The new partnership between Best Fed Beginnings, area hospitals and MMBA marks a commitment to the health of our community’s most vulnerable population, said Updegrave.

“Texans deserve a healthy start to life,” she emphasized. “They deserve human milk.”

Michael says she is dedicated to empowering moms in the area to feed their children breast milk, a mission she shares with MMBA. Her work with Baptist Hospitals of Southeast Texas drove Michael to contact MMBA and offer to open a depot in Beaumont.

“Through my work, I’m an occupational therapist and a lactation consultant. I’ve seen the benefit of breast milk for premature and sick babies, but the fact is, sometimes whenever moms are separated, they can’t always produce what baby needs or some moms may choose not to breast-feed at all, but that is what is best for these babies,” described Michael. “When your baby is in the NICU, you’re separated so you don’t get skin-to-skin contact, and you don’t get to start latching either, so it’s really hard for moms to bring their milk in if they’re not getting that contact with their baby. That’s when it’s critical for donor breast milk to come in, and it gives



The Tran Family

moms peace of mind because then they know that their baby is still getting the best.”

Updegrave says breastfeeding provides babies the perfect recipe for their health, and actually promotes overall wellness throughout communities.

“We know that breastfeeding improves the health of the community. It’s passive immunization of the baby every single time you feed the baby. You are passing on your antibodies,” she explained. “The baby isn’t born knowing how to breastfeed, and it’s not that just because you gave birth that you know how to breastfeed either. So, especially if it’s your first baby, you need support. Lactation consultants provide that. Kara provides that here and at a local hospital, and she can meet people when they need her and really help facilitate them meeting their breastfeeding goals.”

Local mom Lauren Tran is an approved breast milk donor who has donated to MMBA. She, her husband Vinnie and their daughter Ava visited Best Fed Beginnings on opening day, Feb. 21, to make a donation. Tran said she started giving at the suggestion of a friend. She does it to help the babies.

“I produce extra, and my daughter gets enough already,” said Tran. “It’s just a little selfless act that I know will help others, babies who need the milk and whatnot – especially when I found out the milk bank donates to help premature babies and those that are in need. It’s just a little extra thing that I do. I am not

even putting much effort into it, so I don’t see why not.”

Tran said she has driven to Houston to donate on multiple occasions, and even made a trip there to donate privately to a mom who requested it on Facebook. The woman had “an unplanned c-section,” described Tran, “and the milk just never came in.”

“Her baby didn’t tolerate formula well,” she explained. “A lot of babies don’t tolerate formula, and moms are in desperate need trying to find ways to feed them. It’s either (human breast milk) or they have to buy a special formula that costs like \$60 to \$100. Even so, the baby still doesn’t always tolerate it very well. Breast milk is the most natural thing.”

Tran says she is pleased to be able to donate locally.

“I’m excited I don’t have to drive all the way to Houston anymore,” she said.

“It’s never been easier to donate milk in Southeast Texas,” Michael asserted. “Screening is free for all women currently breastfeeding infants under 1 year old. Once approved as a donor, Best Fed Beginnings will collect your milk donations and send them to MMBA where the milk is tested and pasteurized to make it safe for a vulnerable infant.

“It’s that easy to save a life.”

In 2018, the milk bank received donations from 1,180 women and pasteurized and dispensed 775,000 ounces of donor human milk. MMBA needs 1,500 donors to meet the expected need for donor human milk in 2019. Lactating women in Southeast Texas interested in donating their breast milk for the benefit of premature, ill and medically fragile infants may call toll-free to (877) 813-6455 or visit milkbank.org.

The Best Fed Beginnings donation depot for MMBA accepts breast milk donations by appointment.

– Sharon Brooks



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