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March of Dimes enlists 'little fighter'

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Betty Taylor thought she was going to lose her son when she developed complications 26 weeks into her pregnancy.

When he was born in 1999, during emergency surgery, Ezekiel "Zeek" Taylor weighed 1 pound, 14 ounces.

Zeek, now 8 and the March of Dimes 2007 National Ambassador, is visiting Western Pennsylvania this week with his mother to promote the March of Dimes' annual WalkAmerica money-raising campaign.



Ezekiel "Zeek" Taylor

"Imagine a 2-pound bag of sugar," Betty Taylor said in describing Zeek to workers at the Urban League of Pittsburgh on Monday, the first stop of a three-day visit that includes the neonatal intensive care unit at Magee-Womens Hospital.

Zeek spent more than three months in intensive care at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C., she said. He faced many medical battles -- anemia, jaundice, acid reflux, hernias, bacterial meningitis and a hole in his heart that required surgery.

"This little fighter is still here," she said, as Zeek relished his newfound fame, autographing photos at a nearby table.

Zeek and his parents are telling their story around the country, as the March of Dimes uses this year's WalkAmerica campaign to raise awareness of the high rate of premature births among blacks.

The agency's walk in Pittsburgh will be April 29. The 3.1-mile walk will begin at 9 a.m. on the North Shore near the Del Monte Center and continue along the river to around 16th Street and back.

"Together, we are working to improve the health of all pregnant women, and through fundraising efforts such as WalkAmerica 2007, Magee-Womens Hospital and other community organizations receive much-needed support to help thousands of children just like Zeek," said UPMC Health Plan President Diane Holder, the Pittsburgh walk's honorary chairwoman.

Kelly Fraasch, 31, of Mt. Lebanon, knows about premature birth firsthand. Her daughter, Taylor, 5, weighed 1 pound, 4 ounces at birth.

"I did everything right, took vitamins, went to the doctor regularly," Fraasch said. Her daughter's birth -- 17 weeks prematurely -- spurred Fraasch to get involved with the March of Dimes, where she is associate director of program services at the agency's West Penn Division in Pittsburgh.