



Georgia Cancer Center, MCG professor grateful for daughter's open-heart surgery at Children's

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AUGUSTA, Ga. (March 13, 2023) – [Marlo Vernon](#) has worked at the [Medical College of Georgia](#) and the [Georgia Cancer Center](#) for more than 20 years. Her work focuses on engaging with communities to address cancer health disparities in the community.

Normally, she's thinking about what her neighbors and community need and how her work and the work of GCC and MCG can make a difference. It wasn't until she was pregnant with her daughter Isla that she'd be the one who needed help from her co-workers and the hospital right next to her work.

Isla Vernon is one of six kids for the Vernons and the first to be born at [AU Health](#). She was born with Down syndrome and with a balanced complete atrioventricular canal defect (CAVC). This defect creates a hole in the atria of her heart, causing her blood to mix. She has needed multiple surgeries, including a major open-heart surgery in December, which required Isla to be put on an [ECMO](#) machine.

Vernon says she was grateful to have been able to receive the help of the nurses and doctors at the [Children's Hospital of Georgia](#) in the [NICU](#) for all they've done.

"The first word that comes to my mind is gratitude," said Vernon. "All the staff members, nurses and doctors have been so kind and really caring. It's part of that focus on patient and family-centered care, and to experience it first-hand, I'm just grateful."

Isla is back home and moving towards her new normal, but her journey was not easy. Thankfully, Vernon's colleagues at GCC and AU Health stepped up to help out.

"My boss is [Dr. Martha Tingen](#), and when I told her about Isla, she immediately started calling people and getting me connected. I've never had to take advantage of the

services we have here, and sometimes it's a weird feeling to walk on campus as a patient after being on campus so often," Vernon said. "It comes full circle in a way."

Another colleague of hers, [Jeana Lauderdale](#), was able to record Isla's heartbeat during one of Marlo's sonograms and put a device into a stuffed bear. The family always had that bear with them and could always press the toy's hand to hear Isla's heartbeat.

Vernon said this was for her other kids so they could feel like they were a part of everything, and it's something that she'll always remember: the compassion of her friends and work family.

"We had been waiting for all these surgeries since she was born. We were ready to get them behind us and get her home," said Vernon.

The Vernons were also grateful for the [Ronald McDonald house](#). The family lives 30 minutes away, and while their daughter was in the NICU they were looking at options to stay closer to the hospital. They were able to stay at the non-profit during Isla's stay in the NICU.

Vernon says she was only getting two to three hours of sleep a day but being closer to Isla and having some meals taken care of for them made for a huge difference.

"We could just walk across the street to where she was when it was time to feed her and I could be right there to hold her. It made the whole experience better," she said. "We did that until we got her discharged from the NICU. It's such a stressful time and to be told you have to leave is heartbreaking, so I'm just grateful for how everything went."

View pictures of Isla and the Vernon family [here](#).

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