Little Wings Wine Label Lifts Miller School’s Division of Neonatology

They say that whenever an angel gets its wings, a bell rings. The bell that Miami resident Jorge Bustamante heard in his head three years ago may well have been a sign that his beloved daughter, Mikaela, whose life ended far too soon, had gotten her wings. But it also signaled the genesis of an idea Jorge had that would turn anguish into action, and tragedy into tribute.

Project: New Born donors
Jorge and Mairi Bustamante, with their son, Jaxon, and Eduardo Bancalari, M.D. Mairi shows off a bottle of Little Wings wine commemorating daughter, Mikaela, who was cared for at the Schatzi and Stanley Kassal Project: New Born Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Holtz Children’s Hospital at the UM/Jackson Memorial Medical Center. When Bustamante and his wife, Mairi, welcomed Mikaela, their
first child, into the world in February 2015, she was just 24 weeks gestational age. In spite of her fighting spirit – and the amazing care she received at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine’s Department of Pediatrics, as well as the staff of the Schatzi and Stanley Kassal Project: New Born Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Holtz Children’s Hospital at the UM/Jackson Memorial Medical Center – Mikaela passed away after just 11 days.

“Her passing left an incredible void in our lives,” Bustamante said. “I was yearning for a way to honor and celebrate her short and beautiful life.”

Bustamante is a wine connoisseur – he proposed to Mairi in the heart of wine country, in Napa Valley, California – and it was his passion for wine that sparked his idea to produce a wine with a very special purpose.

Working with a winemaker in California’s Monterey Bay region, the couple crafted a custom-label wine to commemorate Mikaela’s short life, and to raise funds that would help bring hope to families of other NICU babies. They called it “Little Wings,” a name inspired by a Jimi Hendrix song that spoke to both of them.

The wine’s first vintage, a 17-month old, oak-aged Syrah priced at around $40 a bottle, was released in 2017, and all 800 bottles quickly sold out. It struck a chord with people who could relate to the Bustamante’s loss because they, too, had had premature babies or suffered miscarriages.

“So many people have had the child of a family member or friend spend time in a NICU,” said Mairi Bustamante. “We all benefit from the research and the work they do. We wanted to
make sure we continue to help other children.”

On December 21, 2017, the Bustamantes presented a $5,000 check to Eduardo Bancalari, M.D., professor of pediatrics, director of the Division of Neonatology at UM’s Miller School of Medicine, and chief of newborn service at Jackson Memorial Hospital. Their donation will benefit Project: New Born, supporting neonatology research and programs at UHealth – the University of Miami Health System.

“We could never do what we do here without the support of people like the Bustamantes, who have committed to helping Project: New Born, which has supported our Division for the past 40 years,” said Bancalari. “They help fund our clinical activities, our equipment needs, and our research.”

Bustamante said it was all of the amazing people in the NICU – the nurses, doctors, residents, and fellows – that inspired them to donate. “Although, in the end, Mikaela couldn’t be saved, Mairi and I really felt that they were doing something right here, and we wanted to find a way to help others in the same situation.”

Little Wings’ second vintage is scheduled for release this spring.