

Stafford police release the Titan on local crime

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

After a man tried to abduct a Stafford County child earlier this year, nearly every law enforcement officer in the county got involved, including a police dog that's gotten considerable attention in his 2½ years with the Stafford Sheriff's Office.

Investigators tracked the suspect to his Embrey Mill home, called in a SWAT team, sent in a drone, used crisis negotiators and deployed chemicals, but got no response from the inside.

Then, the Sheriff's Office sent in Sgt. Baris Demirci and his K9, Titan, a black German shepherd whose zeal for police work lives up to his name. Titan started barking at a wall and police realized the suspect was behind the plaster. Somehow he'd fallen through a floor and ended up next to the sump pump.

"If it wasn't for Titan, they would never have found the guy," said Deputy Bo Truslow, also a K9 officer. "The guy was breathing through a tube to the outside, hiding behind a wall. What human would have found him there?"

Demirci admits the case was one of the finer moments



Titan sprints toward a squad car that contains a 'suspect' during a training exercise in Stafford on Sept. 27.

for the 4-year-old Titan.

"You're like a proud dad when you see him perform," said Demirci, a patrol deputy who also directs the county's K9 teams and is the president of the Virginia Police Canine Association. "We put a lot of work into these dogs, when they finally get to do it and do it well, it's exciting."

And that's about as close to gushing as Demirci gets. An Army soldier for five years and policeman for 12, the 6-foot 4-inch officer is as solid as a wall a suspect might hide behind—and about as chatty as one. Teammates sarcastically describe him as

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a ray of sunshine—they add a certain F-word to the description—and Demirci would be the first to admit that he and Titan share a personality trait.

“He doesn’t really like being around people,” he said about Titan. “He’s like his owner.”

Demirci was reluctant to single out Titan from the rest of the team because he didn’t want a story to become “the Titan show.” He sought to demonstrate that “my men work very hard to give the public the best performing dogs that we can.”

That was obvious last week, when the teams spent every day working toward their annual certification. Sometimes, the officers put on puffy bite suits and hid in the woods, waiting for patrol dogs like Titan, Rip or Mija to find them. Other times, they hid an item in a bookshelf or behind a cabinet for detection by Maui, a drug-sniffing dog.

Or, they operated a drone overhead while the department’s two hounds—Jynx and Ruby—tracked traces of human odor through the woods and across ravines while the wind gusted.

A seventh K9, a patrol dog, is in training and will join the Stafford force in December.

As the handlers described what they do, they emphasized that it’s all fun to the dogs. The canines want to find “the toy, whether that’s a person or gun or bombs. They’re just like kids playing a game,” Demirci said.

“See the tail is wagging,” said Truslow, pointing to Titan but he could have been describing any dog apprehending a suspect. “They don’t even know they’re working.”

If that’s the case, then Titan loves to play—and he’s serious about it.

‘HE’S PHENOMENAL’

Titan has apprehended seven or eight suspects since he joined the department in February 2020, Demirci said. Up to that point, the Sheriff’s Office was averaging maybe one K9 apprehension a year, although it went five years without any, he said.

Titan’s blown those averages out of the water. A report from the Sheriff’s Office in late January described a case involving stolen cars. Two suspects fled into the woods of a South Stafford neighborhood and “Demirci and his faithful K9 Titan immediately began a track,” according to the department’s news release.

It continued: “Sgt. Demirci made an announcement to surrender or the K9 would be released. The suspect incorrectly judged his ability to outrun Titan and instead of giving up, turned and fled up the hill.”

The suspect was quickly apprehended by the dog, treated for his bites and charged with several counts of possession of stolen property and obstruction



PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Sgt. Baris Dimirci restrains and yells instructions to his dog, Titan, after pulling him off the ‘suspect’ during a training exercise. Titan has developed a reputation for finding suspects.

of justice.

Titan had the same results after a police chase in February and a botched robbery in August, both this year. Nine months after he joined the department, Titan apprehended a man after a series of incidents which included the man siccing his own dogs on officers.

The pit bulls retreated after being confronted by the police, including Demirci, who had released the Titan.

“Dogs are like people, they’re all unique, but Titan, he’s phenomenal,” said Deputy Frank O’Neill. “I think he’s proved that. He’s awesome. A lot of that is the dog but a lot of it can be contributed to the handler.”

AN ANCHOR WITH TEETH

O’Neill wants to be a K9 handler and volunteered last week to be the decoy, the toy, the guy in the bite suit—whatever you want to call it—because that’s how K9 officers get their start. They see what it feels like on the receiving end and get a feel for how the human-and-dog teams fine tune their tactics.

O’Neill had hidden in the woods and been found by the dogs—and at one point, was on the ground while Titan clung to his arm like an anchor with teeth. When Demirci approached, Titan started to whine even as he tightened his grip.

“He’s saying, Dad I want to keep playing,” Truslow said.

“He’s just like a big ol’ baby,” Demirci added.

But that baby had to be pulled off O’Neill and that was no easy task. Demirci grabbed the dog’s choke collar and kept applying pressure until Titan, still whining, let go. The handlers have verbal commands to make the dogs release, but also use the manual method.



Deputy Franco Martinez holds back Mija, his K9, as he lets her out of the squad car for a training exercise in Stafford.

Demirci said they don’t want a suspect to hear the release command and take the chance to hurt the dog. Or, the suspect may grab his injury and the dog might interpret that as aggression and bite a second time, Truslow said.

For another scenario—a routine traffic stop—O’Neill got the easy part. He was the driver and he came out with his hands up when Demirci shouted that he was part of the Stafford K9 team, that if the suspect didn’t announce himself, he would release the dog.

“He’ll find you and he’ll bite you,” Demirci said with a hefty dose of intimidation.

Fellow K9 handler, Deputy Dominic Feller, was the decoy and he sat in the passenger seat, refusing to come out. He was wearing a new bite suit, a \$1,500 item that provided a layer of padding inside looked more like street clothes than some of the puffier versions of old.

He and fellow officers showed no mercy as they teased Ferrell about the rust-colored suit, saying it matched his eyes and

looked good on him. “He’s got his skinny jeans on,” Demirci said.

It was no laughing matter when Ferrell ran from the car and Titan was released. He grabbed the 300-pound officer by the left arm and brought him to the ground. Other officers yelled, “What a catch,” as Titan latched on and Ferrell grimaced.

While the suit protected him from punctures, it didn’t eliminate the pressure and Ferrell said it felt like his skin was rolling. He’s not prone to bruising, but said he knew he’d be black and blue later.

‘BITING BIGFOOT’

Police dogs are trained to bite major muscle groups only—arms and legs—not the face, neck, back or groin where they would do more damage. The goal is to apprehend, and in most cases, suspects are left with four bite marks, Demirci said.

“If they’re not compliant, it can get a lot worse,” he said.

The way Rip likes to shake his head when he’s biting or Titan gives an extra yank, the same

way a cat lets go of a bird so it can swat it again, the dogs clearly could pull an arm out of socket or dislocate a shoulder if the person fights them.

Ferrell’s fellow officers decided it would be good for him to do just that and to let Titan break in the new suit. Between bites, Demirci pulled Titan off, using the choke collar again, and Ferrell got repositioned as if he were going to block the dog with another extremity.

If Titan had been wearing a bit, he would have been champ-ing at it. As Demirci held him back, slightly off the ground in the split seconds between moves, Titan’s paws clawed the air, revving up for release. Sometimes, they touched the ground and stirred up dust in his eagerness to go.

Bringing down Ferrell was like “biting Bigfoot,” Demirci said, and demonstrated how an 85-pound dog can take out a dangerous threat two or three times his body weight.

“That makes our lives easier and safer,” the K9 officer said, “and mitigates the risk to people.”

‘LIKE A WOLF’

Several dogs in the unit have never apprehended a suspect, even though they’ve been called to the scene repeatedly. Titan doesn’t get deployed any more often, it’s just been the luck of the draw in terms of the calls he’s gotten, Demirci said.

Lots of times, suspects will surrender as soon as the officer announces that K9s are present. If that doesn’t do it, their barking usually will, Truslow said.

Demirci wants the police dogs to command respect, not abject fear.

“We don’t want people to think we’re out here destroying lives,” he said. “No one likes hurting other people by siccing a dog after them, but the only stuff that gets any attention is the people getting bit.”

But once more, it’s clear from the other officers than Titan is a force to be reckoned with. During one exercise that included a Sheriff’s Office drone overhead—so the dogs could get used to the noise it makes and not be distracted—O’Neill again put on the bite suit and hid in tall grass.

Rip, with his black muzzle, reddish body and legs like a deer, took the scenic route getting to the suspect, relishing the chance to run in wide circles and feel the breeze through his ears.

Titan later ran, not as fast as Rip, but took a more direct route to the hiding suspect.

“Isn’t he pretty?” Demirci said, watching Titan from atop a hill. “He’s prancing around like a gazelle.”

Ferrell, who’d felt Titan’s bite two days earlier, described him another way.

“He’s like a wolf in his natural habitat,” he said.

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‘A level of bravery that most people can’t face’

BY CATHY DYSON
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As an Army Ranger injured three different times in Iraq—from gunfire, an explosive device and even a grenade blast to the face—Richard Rein tried to cope with memories from battle and the loss of his buddies.

But nothing would make the nightmares go away. He felt guilty for surviving and remorse for things he’d done, even though his actions on the Iraqi battlefield earned him three Purple Hearts as well as a Bronze Star with a combat “V” for valor.

“I didn’t know how to deal with it, I didn’t know how to ask for help,” he said. “I tried to bury it, I tried to ignore it, I tried to do everything to act like I didn’t have a problem.”

When the now 37-year-old started taking more pain medicine than doctors prescribed, along with alcohol and, later, whatever street drugs he could get his hands on, things got even worse.

“That just fueled an addiction that got way out of hand and I couldn’t quit, with my best attempts,” Rein said. “I didn’t understand the power of addiction.”

The arresting officer, who charged him with two counts of possession of heroin and



Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, the guest speaker for the graduation, honors Rein and others.

fentanyl, knew that those who served in the military sometimes have trouble readjusting to life outside a war zone. The officer recommended that Rein, who goes by Rick, seek help through the Rappahannock Regional Veterans Treatment Docket, an intensive program for former service members in legal trouble.

Rein did just that and graduated from the 18-month program on Thursday. The Spotsylvania County Circuit Court was filled with people who applauded his efforts, including eight other veterans in various phases of the program, former servicemembers who volunteer

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as mentors to the participants and even Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares, who was guest speaker at the event.

“Going through this program shows a level of bravery that most people sometimes can’t face,” Miyares said as he stood in the courtroom and addressed his remarks to Rein. “Sometimes we’re not wired to admit that we need help, we’re not wired to say that we could get through only with the help of others (who are) in that foxhole figuratively with us.”

Rein certainly acknowledged those who gave him the “direction and accountability” he needed—the treatment specialists, probation officers, counselors and his own mentor, Daniel Cortez, whom Rein said was available whenever he needed help, day or night. However, Rein had to toe the line and get himself to mandatory screenings and sessions—which took place almost daily in the first year—or he would face sanctions or even possible dismissal.

“It felt so good being back with military core values,” Rein said. “You guys have truly saved my life.”

Rein served with the 75th Ranger Regiment, a Fort Benning, Georgia, unit that describes itself as a “lethal, agile and flexible force, capable of conducting many complex, joint special operations missions.”

Judge Ricardo Rigual, who helped create the treatment program for veterans with Spotsylvania County deputy public defender Wendy Harris and state Sen. Bryce Reeves, reminded Rein that he’d undertaken a different kind of mission when he signed onto the veterans docket.

Rigual recalled what he told Rein the first day he saw him—that the program was designed to help him get back to the man he was and that those around him would provide guidance and coaching.

“But I want you to realize when you leave here that you’re the one who did this,” the judge said. “This wasn’t a gift bestowed upon you. You made the choice to help yourself and here you stand, the man you were before, the man



FILE / PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Rick Rein of Tree Times assesses the broken limbs of a pin oak along Colonial Street in Fredericksburg.



TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Daniel Cortez, chairman of the National Vet Court Alliance and Rein's mentor, introduces Rein in court.



TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Victoria Ratliff, Rick Rein's fiancée, smiles at Rein after his graduation ceremony in Spotsylvania.

you are today, the man you've always been.”

Rein fulfilled his obligations with such determination that “he should be the national poster veteran for our program,” Cortez said. He mentioned Rein’s work at the Oxford House in Fredericksburg, where he has led veterans and other residents trying to end their addiction to drugs and alcohol.

Ann Baker, probation program manager with Rappahannock Regional Jail, said Rein was the first one to go through the program without a single sanction.

“That is a really big deal,” she said. “He wasn’t even five minutes late to any of his meetings.”

Rein is the eighth graduate of the program that started in 2018, specifically for Spotsylvania

A \$20,000 DONATION

The National Vet Court Alliance, a Stafford County-based group focused on increasing the number of veterans dockets nationwide and decreasing the prevalence of suicide among former service members, donated \$20,000 last week to the Rappahannock Regional Veterans Treatment Docket.

The money came from a partnership between the alliance and lead sponsor GOYA foods, said Daniel Cortez, group chairman. He and Bob Unanue, CEO of GOYA, previously served together on a national commission.

Cortez said the partnership

will work to raise \$1 million as seed money for construction of a local complex to serve veterans throughout the Fredericksburg region.

The effort is needed, Cortez said, to combat national statistics cited on the alliance’s website, which states an average of 20 to 22 veterans die by suicide every day and more than 500,000 face legal problems.

“Our veterans are the backbone of our nation,” Unanue said. “GOYA is proud to stand with the National Vet Court Alliance and the compassionate actions of Virginia’s Veteran Treatment Courts and Dockets.”

—Cathy Dyson

County residents. It has expanded to serve veterans throughout the region and has worked with former service members from every locality in the region

except Caroline County, Harris said.

Rein thanked his employer, Billy Kelley, also a veteran, for giving him a job and the time off that he needed to meet all the program obligations.

“The guy has really excelled,” said Kelley, who runs Tree Times in Stafford County. “It’s amazing what he’s done for himself in the short time we’ve been working together. His leadership skills are phenomenal and his work ethic’s great. Being prior military myself, I know what Rick is capable of and his go-getter skills.”

One of Rein’s three combat injuries involved being shot several times in the ankle and once in the upper right thigh, but that hasn’t kept him from physical labor. He’s a tree climber in Kelley’s com-

pany.

“It hurts some days, but I still get up,” Rein said, adding he’s not about to squander the second chance he’s been given. Plus, being high off the ground “cures that adrenalin rush that I like to feed.”

Rein also suffered serious injuries when a blast from a rocket-propelled grenade went across his face on Jan. 4, 2005. That was his third injury and the one that took him out of service. He’d resisted leaving after the first two times he was hurt because he wanted to stay with his unit.

The former Ranger didn’t go into a lot of details about the night of the grenade attack except to say it claimed the lives of his two best friends. He suffered trauma to the front of his brain and needed massive dental work to his jaw and nine plastic surgeries at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

At Thursday’s court appearance, his face showed a few small scars but not the damage one might expect. Rein said skin grafts, and a goatee, helped cover the worst of it.

A more noticeable feature was a Viking braid that ran down the back of his head. His fiancée, Victoria Ratliff, braided his blondish hair for him that day. While Rein said he was “super nervous” standing in front of the court and special guests, one of the few times a smile replaced his jitters was when Cortez talked about the couple.

“It moves me every time I see them together because all I see is true love,” Cortez said.

Rein and Ratliff plan to wed in October and Cortez, a marriage commissioner, will perform the ceremony. The couple plans to live in a house they just bought in Stafford and to unite their families. Both have children from previous relationships.

“This program helped me believe I was a person worth saving and that’s the biggest lesson I learned,” Rein said. “To the others in this program, the only advice I can give you is to pour every ounce of strength and energy you have into this program and your recovery. Your future deserves it.”

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PARTICIPANTS NEED HELP GETTING THERE

Getting participants in the Rappahannock Regional Veterans Treatment Docket to mandatory counseling, treatment sessions, support meetings and court appearances can be trying due to transportation problems, said Wendy Harris, deputy public defender in Spotsylvania County.

She and Judge Ricardo Rigual helped start the program in 2018 along with support from the Commonwealth’s Attorney, Sheriff’s

Office and Rappahannock Regional Jail. It’s modeled after drug-court programs and offers veterans the chance to have charges dismissed if they complete the intensive 18-month program. Only nonviolent offenders are eligible.

At Thursday’s regular session, Rigual checked in with eight veterans going through the five program phases and asked if each had any problems. One woman said she’d been late to a mandatory meeting because of

transportation issues. Rigual congratulated her for also mentioning solutions she’d considered, to keep from being late again, but said he still had to impose a sanction against her. He added another half hour to her community service requirements.

Many veterans have lost driver’s licenses after being charged with driving under the influence, Harris said. Rigual has drafted legislation, asking Virginia to not impose that restric-

tion on veterans going through this type of treatment program. In the first year alone, they’re required to attend sessions almost every day, Harris said.

One graduate told the court that he’d paid Uber drivers more than \$800 per month to get him to sessions.

Each veteran has a mentor assigned and all are former service members who volunteer their time just like all the court, police and jail officials

involved with the program. Mentors try to drive veterans to as many appointments as they can but some have limited availability because of full-time jobs, Harris said.

She said the program is always in need of donations of gift cards for Uber and Lyft rides, as well as more volunteer mentors. Anyone interested can contact her at wbharris@vadefenders.org.

—Cathy Dyson

Dangerous birth during blizzard ends with joy

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

As the parents of Madelyn Ann Hoad welcomed their baby home—after she spent her first six weeks in the NICU—they came to realize a lot of people played a part in her safe arrival.

Jessica Witter and Tyler Hoad got help from first responders, friends and strangers they encountered as they made a perilous journey from King George County to Mary Washington Hospital during the early January blizzard.

A fire department brush truck with a snow plow attached literally paved the way for the ambulance carrying Witter, whose life was in jeopardy, along with that of her unborn baby. Once she arrived at the hospital, the pregnant woman said she felt like she was in a medical TV drama as emergency workers enveloped her—and then little Maddie, who was born more than 2 months early—with care and concern.

“I just wanted to thank everybody because I am so grateful for being alive and for our baby being alive,” the mom said. “It was honestly the most terrifying thing I’ve ever experienced, I was bleeding to death. Everybody did everything they could to get us to the hospital safely.”



KING GEORGE FIRE AND RESCUE

The dash camera of King George’s brush truck shows the blizzard-like conditions in the region on Jan. 3.

Witter said “it’s taken a while to kind of get back to normal” and to resume a new routine as little Maddie has taken her place in the family. Witter has four

older children and Hoad, one.

Their story illustrates the way a community came together to help a woman whose already high-risk pregnancy developed an even more dangerous complication at the worst possible time.

“I can’t overstate how the whole team came together to help,” said Chief David Moody with King George’s Department of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services.

King George had triple the number of normal calls on that snowy day, Moody said, citing countless county workers and residents who stepped in to help.

‘HIGH RISK, TIMES THREE’

Witter woke up on Jan. 3 to a raging snowstorm—and heavy bleeding. She wasn’t due for another nine or 10 weeks and her labor hadn’t started, but a serious complication was at work.

A few years earlier, Witter had an ablation, a procedure in which the uterus lining was removed to reduce menstrual bleeding. As she understood it, she couldn’t get pregnant afterward, so when she and Hoad found out otherwise, “that was a super surprise,” she said.

But it also made her prone to miscarriage or problems with the pregnancy. Also, she would be age 35 by the time she

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delivered, which put her at higher risk. Her doctor also diagnosed a condition in which the placenta was too low in the cervix.

“That made me high risk, times three,” she said, noting she’d seen a specialist who feared another problem—that the placenta would grow into the uterus. “Pretty much, the scare was if I started bleeding, I would have uncontrollable bleeding and bleed out. I had a lot of stuff against me.”

When the bleeding started, Hoad called 911 and learned the ambulance might not be able to get to their home in the Comorn area of King George. As much as 2 inches of snow was falling each hour and pine trees were snapping like twigs and covering roadways.

Hoad said he’d try to get Witter to a nearby road to meet the ambulance, but couldn’t get his car out of the driveway.

“I was just chucking towels at her, trying to stop the bleeding,” the father said. “I’ve never seen that amount of blood before.”

‘WORST-CASE SCENARIO’

As Witter started walking from the driveway, King George Sheriff’s Deputy James Simmons pulled up in his Ford Explorer. His wife, Shawn, is the administrative health and safety chief with the county’s fire and rescue department, and she knew Witter was facing “a worst-case scenario.”

She asked her husband if he could get to Witter. He loaded the couple into his Explorer and was trying to take them to meet the ambulance, but some areas looked like “a bomb went off,” Witter said.

People were cutting down trees to clear roads—and Hoad and Simmons joined in several times, trying to get the pregnant passenger through the snow. But when they reached one area where a massive tree was down, the deputy had to stop.

He saw a Jeep on the other side of the tree and asked the driver if he’d take the emergency pa-

tient to meet the ambulance. Witter has no idea who the person was—and she’d sure like to thank him. He lifted her into the Jeep, and off she and Hoad went. They waited at the top of a hill for the ambulance.

One rescue squad had been dispatched from Fairview Beach but couldn’t get to the couple, and a second from company headquarters on State Route 3 was on another call. Shawn Simmons and Christina Degruy, who’s pregnant with her third child, were able to take another ambulance and reach Witter.

Shawn Simmons also asked if the department’s brush truck, with the plow in front, could come with the squad.

“That really proved to be extremely vital,” said Chief David Moody. “That’s probably the only time in history that we’ve actually had to plow from King George County all the way to Mary Washington Hospital. It went the entire distance.”

Even in Fredericksburg, roads were closed with jackknifed trucks and abandoned vehicles, and the squad had to detour through neighborhoods. Once Witter was dropped off at the hospital, the brush truck with the plow—initially manned by Rodney Ash and Kevin Cook—probably worked straight for the next 72 hours, assisting with calls, Moody said.

‘IN THE NICK OF TIME’

Meanwhile, in the ambulance, Simmons and Degruy tried to keep the patient calm. Witter’s a dental assistant who regularly takes her patients’ blood pressure, so every time the machine checked her vitals, Witter got more and more anxious about her dropping pressure.

It took about 2 hours and 15 minutes for the entourage to reach the hospital.

“They got me there and rushed me back to some room,” she said. “I felt like I was in a ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ episode. There were like 10 to 15 people, all in masks and scrubs, asking questions and taking blood.”

Hoad hadn’t been able to ride with Witter in the ambulance, so the dep-

uty took him to a nearby Sheetz where he put out his own call for help. A Facebook friend drove him to the hospital.

He got to her room “in the nick of time,” Witter said, right before she was taken into emergency surgery. The two were able to say goodbye, just in case, and she told him to tell all the kids she loved them. He later joked that it was part of her “I’m-gonna-die” speech, but neither was laughing at that moment.

Surgeons delivered the baby through C-section and performed a hysterectomy to stop the mother’s bleeding. She got two units of blood to make up for what she’d lost.

Meanwhile, little Maddie was evaluated in the neonatal intensive care unit. She weighed 3½ pounds. While her level of prematurity was one problem, an even bigger issue “really was the circumstances of her birth,” said Dr. Joshua Attridge, the neonatologist on duty. That kind of blood loss can be critical for both mother and baby, and Madelyn needed help breathing as well as a blood transfusion.

Newborns are tested after birth and given an Apgar score based on their heart rate, reflexes, muscle tone and breathing. Doctors like for babies to score between 6 and 8, Attridge said.

Madelyn’s score was 2. “She really wasn’t doing much on her own, not responding in the way we would have liked her to,” he said.

The NICU put in place its “golden hour process” with a team that included a doctor, nurses and respiratory therapist along with the resuscitation equipment needed to help the baby breathe, said Nancy Young, the NICU’s nurse manager. With the treatments, and over the course of several weeks, Madelyn eventually was able to breathe on her own. She also needed special IVs for feeding because she was unable to suck.

Most premature babies are able to leave the NICU when they reach what would have been their 36th to 38th week of gestation.

“She was right at that

point,” Attridge said. “Despite her rough start, she went home at 37 weeks, which was pretty impressive.”

‘DESTINED FOR SOMETHING’

Young spent at least 15 minutes every day with the parents when they visited Madelyn and she never heard the story about their perilous journey to the hospital until the day before the baby went home.

“This mom and dad were so dedicated and devoted to being present and doing all the right things for Madelyn,” Young said, adding how surprised she was when she heard about the trauma.

But now that little Maddie’s safe at home, Witter and Hoad have had time to reflect on what a tale they’ll have to tell when she’s older. Even with all that took place, Witter believes everything happened for a reason.

If it hadn’t been snowing, her boyfriend wouldn’t have been at home and she would have faced the emergency alone. She’s grateful the older children, who range in age from 4 to 11, were with other parents. It was traumatizing enough for her, she can’t imagine how it would be for a child to see all that blood.

Witter and Hoad wonder what life has in store for little Maddie, given all she had to go through to get here. They laughed about comments the NICU nurses posted on Facebook, including one from Nurse Stephanie Crabil in which she described the baby’s “mean mugs” and the way she cuts her eyes. Fellow nurse Jessica Lee said Madelyn has the best expressions and her family will “always know what she’s thinking. No hiding that.”

Witter believes her daughter’s “little attitude” illustrates her journey, so far.

“She had to make her début into this world extraordinary. She’s just defied all odds,” the mother said, looking at her little one. “You’re destined for something, baby girl, I just don’t know what it is.”