

Hey Baby gets prime billing on top-rated US reality show

A mention on a high-rating US TV show was fantastic publicity for a small Kiwi kids' clothing company. **Jared Savage** reports.

THE EXPOSURE on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* — watched by 44 million viewers — has launched Wellington designer Robyn George-Neich's fledgling company into the limelight in the United States.

Her Hey Baby children's clothing range, which allows parents to easily dress their toddlers, were donated to the family of a Los Angeles policewoman gunned down and paralysed in the line of duty.

The back-to-back Emmy award winning show screened on December 10, and the producers were so pleased with the garments that more orders have been placed for another needy family.

George-Neich's own son Zachory suffered badly from eczema, prompting the former accountant to design and develop her own range of low-irritant, easy-to-use baby clothes.

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ROBYN GEORGE-NEICH

One Hey Baby specialty is a fleece one-piece “baby wrap”, with a hood and enclosed feet. The company's philosophy is based around making baby clothes simple — a philosophy that obviously impressed the eye of US television producers trying to make life easier for a disabled mother.

Sale orders in New Zealand haven't skyrocketed since the episode aired, but the Wellington mother of two is ecstatic with the ringing endorsement.

“The most exciting is that you can't pay to get on the show, you have to be good,” she said. “It's a great endorsement. They liked the products and we've been given a second shot, that's really cool.”

After launching the range in 2003, George-Neich flew to the US to set up a stall at a Las Vegas trade show.

She was approached by an *Extreme Makeover* staff member whose job is to travel throughout the US and find products for the programme.

“She took some home and then called back to say her daughter hadn't taken them off.”

Listed on the *Extreme Makeover* website and allowed to display the show's distinctive logo on her own site, George-Neich is sure that the publicity will lead to greater turnover — already projected to top \$150,000 this year.

Multi-billion dollar businesses like Sears and Ford have been quick to realise the benefits of sponsoring such a popular show, and they donate thousands of dollars worth of product each week. Panned by critics but adored by the masses, each *Extreme Makeover* episode features a deserving family whose dilapidated house needs major reconstruction.

Filmed over one week, each show is a race against time to rebuild the entire house — including all rooms, the exterior and landscaping — which would usually take four months.

The episode in which Hey Baby makes a guest appearance featured Tim and Kristina Ripatti, who were police officers in the gang division of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Shot in the line of duty a few months ago, Kristina is paralysed from the chest down and struggles to care for their baby daughter Jordan without assistance.

Mercedes Rosa, who chooses the products for the show, said the Kiwi-made custom clothing was picked so the disabled Kristina could dress a squirming child by herself.

The paralysed police officer has some use of her arms and hands, but lacks dexterity and cannot support the weight of her daughter.

“Kristina tearfully shared with America how devastated she is that she has to relearn how to mother Jordan as a paraplegic,” Rosa said.

“She needed a product that would allow her to do this without the limitations you have with retail clothing.”

Although the clothing was not designed specifically for disabled parents, George-Neich said, it was fantastic that it could be used to make life easier for them.

Hey Baby was so popular with the *Extreme Makeover* producers than it



FAMILY MATTERS: Kids' clothing designer Robyn George-Neich with son Zachory, 8, and daughter Samantha, 5. GETTY IMAGES

will be featured on another show, due to be broadcast on February 10, in which the team will help out a “September 11 hero” who helped rescue firemen from the World Trade Centre in 2001. This person has a child with skin allergies and is provided with Hey Baby clothing from the show.

While exposure to 44 million viewers is not to be sneezed at, the real bonus for Hey Baby is how the show is used by distributors — companies who sell the products across North America.

Hey Baby's clothing was not a big

feature of the television show itself, but its association with the programme provides a powerful selling point for the company. Companies do not pay to appear on the show. The level of coverage is decided by the producers.

George-Neich has now sent off her largest order overseas and is preparing to travel to India to help supervise production at a new factory. She is currently dependent on one Chinese production company, a reliance she hopes to reduce by shifting some of her production to the new plant in

India. A large order has been sent to Oregon, US, where extreme weather conditions mean parents have to be more careful dressing babies before taking them outside.

One company that already sells outer-wear for infants has now selected Hey Baby to be its supplier of merino underwear.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition lays it on pretty thick with viewers, but its Hey Baby deal is now helping North American parents avoid doing just that when dressing their toddlers.

— Additional reporting by Chris Daniels.