

Birth renews hope for family

WARNS, From 1B

seas with a Madison-based unit of the 24th Marine Regiment, 2nd Battalion.

The same day Warns was killed, Nielsen received a letter from him saying that he liked her choice of Payton as a name, if the baby turned out to be a girl.

After 13 hours of labor, Payton was born about 7 a.m. Thursday at Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital in Wauwatosa. She weighed nearly 7 pounds, and family members immediately noticed a resemblance to her father.

"It's a little gift from him," Nielsen said. "He would love her."

Calling the occasion bitter-sweet, the 24-year-old mother is embarking on her life as a single parent with lingering tears of sorrow for a lost love, mixed with tears of joy for a healthy, happy baby.

"It's a new beginning," she said, gently kissing Payton on the forehead. "It's a happy new beginning."

The seventh-floor room at Froedtert was decorated with poster-sized photographs of Bobby Warns.

Warns and Nielsen met four years ago when both were freshmen at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee — he a business student from

Waukesha, she an architecture student from suburban Minneapolis.

Romance soon blossomed, and the young couple began discussing marriage. When his Marine reserve unit was activated for the war in Iraq, they decided to start a family right away and set a wedding date after his military service was done.

After the deadly land-mine explosion, family and friends rallied around Nielsen throughout the pregnancy.

During funeral services at St. Mary's Catholic Church, Nielsen told mourners she was expecting Bobby's baby, adding that he had anticipated fatherhood as "something to look forward to when he came home."

Several of Warns' closest buddies visited the hospital after Payton's arrival and offered the new mother help in the months and years ahead.

"That's what Bob would've wanted — for us to watch over her," said Jim Lohmiller, 24, of Milwaukee. "It's the least we can do."

After graduating from UWM last summer, Nielsen moved into the Waukesha home of Bobby's parents, Robert and Bridget Warns. His older sister, Katie Riesch, became a birthing coach for the expectant mother.

Riesch said she was proud

to be involved in bringing her brother's child into the world.

"As far as getting the next generation started, it opens so many doors," she said. "It gives us a piece of Bobby back."

The baby's full name will be Payton Warns — possibly with a middle name to come later — in keeping with her parents' plans to get married.

Nielsen intends to move back to the Twin Cities area and live with her parents temporarily, while she pursues a teaching certificate. She figures that teaching architecture rather than working as an architect will mean less time away from Payton.

Nielsen's mother, Cindy Nielsen, voiced confidence that her daughter is up to the challenge of parenthood.

"She's very strong, independent, a hard worker," the new grandmother said. "She will be a great mom."

No matter what the future holds, Erin Nielsen and the Warns family have agreed to stay in touch and visit regularly, so that Payton gets to know her extended family.

Nielsen also plans to tell Payton about her father's tragic death as soon as the child is old enough.

"She's going to have questions," Nielsen said. "She's going to have to understand why she doesn't have a dad."