

Being There

A mother and her teenage daughter reflect on their memories of homebirth

By Milva McDonald and Justine McDonald

Web Exclusive

At a soccer game once, I overheard two mothers discussing birth. "Every teenage girl should observe one," said the first. "That would go a long way toward ending teenage pregnancy."

They both laughed. I stayed silent, recognizing the labor-as-nightmare theme and wondering: Is that really what we want our daughters to know about birth?

In the last two and a half years, I've had two baby girls, and my older daughter Justine, now almost 14, has attended both births. I know she will never forget seeing her sisters come into the world. But what, I wonder, did my teenager learn about birth by being there?

When I became pregnant with Claire, Justine admitted to feeling ambivalent. Her ten-year-old brother Eric was enthusiastic about the upcoming birth and wanted to talk about it constantly. But Justine was reserved and didn't want to discuss the pregnancy or attend sibling classes, so in the end we didn't do much formal preparation with her. She said she would come to the hospital but didn't know whether she'd stay in the birthing room. We told her whatever she wanted to do was fine.

On a cold January evening, I went into labor, and we rushed to the hospital. In the end, Justine came along but sat quietly in a chair, saying nothing, while Eric bounced around the room, excitedly asking questions. At one point the baby began to show signs of an elevated heart rate. The obstetrician ordered a fetal monitor and an IV. From then on, I was confined to bed. But I managed to convince the doctor I did not need any pain medication, and when the time came, I delivered my daughter in three hard pushes. Justine watched all of this silently.

Afterward, basking in the glow of my baby's perfection, I asked Justine how the birth had compared to her expectations. She paused for a long moment, then replied that I had not screamed as much as she had thought I would. That, for her, was the best that could be hoped for from labor.

I never imagined she would be attending another birth so soon, but within a year, I became pregnant again. As my delivery date approached, I decided I didn't want to return to the hospital. I wanted to be free to walk during labor, and I wanted Claire to be at the birth, which the hospital wouldn't allow. A birth center was an option, but I did not want to travel miles during labor to a center. No, I decided. This time help would come to me. I would give birth at home.

Once we settled on a midwife, Justine, Eric, and Claire came along for the prenatal visits. I'd never experienced pregnancy quite like this before – no ultrasound, no blood tests, only a quick measurement of my fundus, and lots of quiet reassurance. Justine seemed entranced, and I felt healthy and strong.

The night before my due date, I went into labor. At about 5 a.m. my midwife and her assistant arrived, and active labor kicked in about an hour later. Five hours of contractions followed, with slow, irregular progress. I walked from room to room, stopping to lean against the walls or squat for contractions. Justine, Eric, Claire, and my husband wandered in and out during this time, while my mother and a pregnant friend stayed downstairs.

Eventually I hit a high wall of discouragement. The midwife put me in the shower, fed me Popsicles, and literally held me up during contractions. My husband did, too. Eric and Justine visited often, and I'll never forget the moment during a contraction when Claire, who had seen the trail of waterproof pads left wherever I went, climbed onto the bed and placed one under my kneeling body.

Finally the moment came. I was squatting on the floor, in the middle of a very strong contraction, when I felt the baby's head. "It's here," I said calmly. "Call everyone."

My husband held me from behind and my other children gathered around as I pushed Abigail out. Incomparable joy and relief flooded over me as she was placed immediately on my chest. My midwife had not announced her gender, so for the first time in four births I got to discover for myself the sex of my baby. A few minutes later I was lying in my own bed, with my baby beside me and my family all around me, and my mother downstairs cooking up a feast for everyone.

Justine's reaction to Abigail's birth was absolutely jubilant. She dropped all the reserve she'd shown after Claire's birth and told me over and over what a great job I'd done and how proud she was of me. She clearly loved the fact that she did not have to leave me and her new sibling in the hospital while she and her brother went home to wait for us.

Later, Justine sat down to write a letter of appreciation to our midwife. She thanked her for all that she had done for me and Abigail, adding that she appreciated how nice things had been during the birth at home, in contrast to at the hospital, where, as she put it, everyone kept running around like there was something wrong.

Reading the letter before she sent it, I stopped at one point and looked over at my teenage daughter, who was holding Abigail, grinning like a lovesick fool. And I thought how wonderful it would be if more young women were given the opportunity to witness a truly perfect birth. I do not believe

it would make them want to become mothers before they are ready. But it would teach them that labor and delivery need not be a frightening, painful process. It would show them that giving birth can be the single most beautiful moment on earth.

Milva McDonald's writing has been published in the Boston Globe and the Beloit Fiction Journal, among other publications. She lives in Medford, Massachusetts, with her husband and four children.

By Justine McDonald

When I was 12 years old, my mother became pregnant with my sister Claire. When I was 13, my sister Abigail was born. Claire came into the world at the hospital, and we had Abigail at home. I was there both times. They were two completely different experiences, although they both ended up with the same result: a beautiful baby girl.

When my mom went into heavy labor with Claire, it seemed that everyone was panicking. We had arrived at the hospital two or three hours before. Mom had been put in a room to be checked out. Later they moved her into the birthing room, and the doctor arrived soon after that. I had been in the waiting room, but when Mom was moved into the birthing room my brother Eric and I went in to watch. The room had lots of medical equipment, and that, I think, contributed to the nervous environment. The doctor said that the baby's heartbeat was too fast, so throughout the labor they kept a monitor on Mom's stomach. During the labor my eyes were fixed on that monitor. Watching the numbers go up, up, up. . . and then down, I was worried about the baby and Mom. The doctor was writing things down in a notebook, and whispering to some of the nurses. I didn't know what to think about that, but because of the environment of the room, it made me think something was wrong.

I was relieved when Claire was finally born. As soon as she came out, they cut her cord and suctioned her and did some other things. It seemed to me like a rude welcoming into the world. But soon they gave her to my mom, where she belonged, and she started nursing happily.

The next day, as I thought about the experience, I realized what an amazing thing birth is. But in the birthing room it was hard for me to realize that, because I was so worried and preoccupied with all the precautions – the IV my mom had, the monitor, and the constant checking.

A few days after Claire was born, I pretty much put the thought of the birthing room out of my head, because I was so thrilled to have a little sister. Everyone says Claire looks like me, and my aunt says,

"It's Justine all over again." Claire is a wonderful addition to my life. I find myself laughing and smiling with her all the time.

A year later, when Mom told me she was pregnant again, I was happy but also a little unsure about what to say when Mom asked me if I wanted to be at the birth. I really did not want to be at the hospital again. I told her I had to think about it.

A week later Mom told me that she was most likely going to have the baby at home with a midwife. I knew some people who had had their babies at home, and it sounded better than the hospital to me. She also asked me if I had thought about whether I wanted to attend the birth. I told her I would. I had decided that since she was having it at home it would be different.

We first met Deborah, our midwife, on a warm cheery summer afternoon. I liked her from the start. She is a kind, gentle person.

But before I knew it, our prenatal visits with Deborah were in the past, and Mom was in labor. Deborah and Diana, her assistant, arrived early in the morning. I remember the feel of our home that morning. I smelled cinnamon toast and, to my surprise, the house seemed peaceful and relatively quiet. The only sound I heard was the comforting voice of Deborah telling Mom she was doing great.

I walked into the kitchen, ate a piece of cinnamon toast, and asked Deborah how much longer she thought it would be. She said it would probably take awhile. My Mom, hearing this, said something like, "It's going to take awhile more? It's already taken forever."

"Long is not wrong, Milva. There is nothing to be worried about," Deborah said. This seemed to calm my mom. Later, Diana showed me a blank book she had brought with a beautifully decorated cover. She told me that everyone was writing a little note to the baby in it. I wrote one, too.

Soon Mom went into heavy labor. I went into the bedroom to watch. My stepdad and brother Eric were in the room, also. We were encouraging Mom and waiting. Before I knew it Mom was pushing out another beautiful baby girl. We were all around Mom watching Abigail slide out. Afterward, Deborah immediately handed her to Mom, and we all huddled close and admired the newest member of the household.

After a few weeks, Mom was up and about again and we were back to our normal lives. It seems to me that Abigail's birth was a small miracle that passed through our lives quickly, but left us wiser and happier than I would ever have thought possible.

As for me, the greatest revelation about this experience was that birth, if one is prepared and goes about it in the right way, is a wonderful experience. Claire's hospital birth was beautiful, but the attitudes of the doctors and the sight of all that medical equipment did not make me look forward to having a baby. Watching Abigail be born, though, made me realize how wonderful becoming a mother can be. I feel privileged to have gotten to experience that.

Justine McDonald, 14, enjoys writing, guitar, basketball, soccer, Jane Austen, and playing with her younger siblings. This is her first published writing.