

Stolen moments

Women in the Twin Cities metro area share their experiences with recurrent pregnancy loss.

By Emma Herville



Sherrysse Corrow and her daughter Eleanor pose together on the front steps of their home. | Photo by Emma Gottschalk

This was it, the only moment Sherrysse Corrow would get with her daughter. She knew she had to spend it right. Julia fit in the palms of her hands, fully formed with fingers and toes and folds in her ears.

Corrow wrapped Julia in a blanket, sang her songs and told her she loved her. And then, when the hospital staff came in and said, "Are you ready for us to take her?" Corrow said a final goodbye to the daughter she'd carried for four months.

Although Corrow lost three pregnancies before having Julia in October 2019, this pregnancy was different. She'd made it past the first trimester. She'd felt Julia bounce and squirm. She'd even laughed along with the ultrasound technician when they'd said, "She's waving at you!"

She'd been bleeding for several weeks after developing two large subchorionic hematomas, a type of blood clot that's formed by the abnormal accumulation of blood between the placenta and the wall of the uterus. But every ultrasound had told her Julia was fine, that she was moving around and her heartbeat was strong. At 16 weeks she was home lying in bed when she felt contractions and told her husband she needed to go to the hospital. But within 10 minutes, she'd already delivered Julia in her bathroom. She placed her baby in a box and drove herself to the hospital.

A psychology professor at Bethel University, Corrow lives in Vadnais Heights with her husband Jeff and 7-year-old daughter Eleanor. After deciding to start a family in 2011, Corrow was pregnant within a month. When she miscarried after a couple weeks, she and Jeff were devastated by the loss of a dream. When she miscarried three more times after having Eleanor, that devastation only mounted.

"You want answers and you don't get them because so many cases of recurrent pregnancy loss are unexplained," Corrow said. "You just don't have answers."

According to the Mayo Clinic, about 10 to 20 percent of known pregnancies end in miscarriage, which is defined as the spontaneous loss of a pregnancy before the 20th week. However, the clinic notes that the actual number is likely much higher because many miscarriages occur before the woman even realizes she is pregnant.

Dr. Beth LaRusso, a perinatal and reproductive psychiatrist at Abbott Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Minneapolis, stresses that most women who miscarry are grieving more than just the loss of a pregnancy. "Your hopes for that child, your hopes of being a mother, your hopes for having a family ... all of that is lost," LaRusso said. "This isn't just a loss of a ball of cells."

According to LaRusso, women who experience one miscarriage are more likely to have depression, anxiety and stress after that miscarriage, as well as after subsequent miscarriages. The desire to have a successful pregnancy, she said, can take on the primary focus of a woman's mental and emotional energy and prevent them from experiencing joy.

'The moment you wish you had'

For Corrow, the big things were obvious – grief, emptiness – but the little things every day were hard, too, like the phone call from the doctor telling her Julia had been chromosomally normal or having to continually walk past the boxes of maternity clothes she couldn't bear to put away.

Waves of grief also come in the form of unexpected pregnancy announcements from friends or family, or distant college classmates, an example of what Corrow calls a stolen moment.

"It's a reminder of the moment you wish you had that you never got," Corrow said. "Not that it was stolen by your friend or family member, but just that there was a moment you were supposed to have and it was stolen."

Facebook, she said, is a constant reminder of these stolen moments. Corrow never got to announce that Julia was born. She hadn't even announced she was pregnant.

"I could have, but that's a hard thing to put on Facebook," Corrow said. "Also, it feels a bit morbid for Facebook."

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Many women take the holiday season as an opportunity to announce their births and pregnancies, which Corrow said makes celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas difficult. To her, the holidays are a reminder of what didn't come to fruition over the course of the year. "Thoughts drifting from 'I should have been five months pregnant right now' to 'Here I am at the end of the year, and still no baby' would often play in her mind."

In Dr. LaRusso's experience, miscarriage or fetal death has the opportunity to bring couples together or tear them apart. Grief is individualized, she said, and couples who are able to communicate openly about their individual experiences of grief tend to do better than those who have different styles of grieving or can't properly express their feelings.

For Corrow's husband, Jeff, one of the hardest things to deal with is his inability to help or resolve the issue.

"At times, I remember feeling like I was floating in a sea of despair without a paddle, unable to guide us where I wanted to go, instead stuck letting the waves of feelings direct where our end destination would be," Jeff said.

After the second and third losses, Jeff found himself crying at his desk at work, going for walks to pull himself together instead of explaining his pain to the people around him.

With little motivation to shave, he grew a beard – something he'd never done. Since losing Julia last year, the beard has not left his face.

"It's a simple reminder of her and the struggles that followed every time I look into the mirror," Jeff said. "Will I shave it someday? Perhaps, but for now I find it to be a good reminder of Julia, and that I'm not the same person I was before the loss."

In Mendota Heights, Resurrection Cemetery hosts a communal fetal committal and burial service every three months for families who have lost an infant to stillbirth or miscarriage. At the service Corrow attended for Julia in February, each family lit a candle for each pregnancy they'd lost before volunteers carried the caskets out to the grave site for burial. All of the babies honored in the service were buried together.

"It was a beautiful service and we were so grateful for the funding provided to make this happen for families," Corrow said. "It provided a sense of closure that we didn't even know we needed."

'The pain doesn't go away'

Two weeks before Minnesota's first stay-at-home order in March, Corrow and three other women sat around a table in the back corner of Cafe Latte on Grand Avenue in St. Paul. They first met in the Minnesota chapter of a Facebook group called Recurrent Pregnancy Loss Support, and each of them has had at least three losses in the past several years.

The women spoke about the stigma they feel surrounding pregnancy loss and miscarriage, and the ways they feel people minimize what they're going through.

"The pain doesn't go away just because you're pregnant again or it's been six months or a year or two years since your loss," said Jessica Stuhr, a Maplewood social worker who lost three pregnancies within a 13-month period. "No one checks in on me anymore. To me, it's been six months but it feels like a minute ago."

After five miscarriages within six years, Nicole Otto of Cottage Grove doesn't think people realize the weight of her losses. When she hears parents complain about their busy schedules, she can only think about how desperately she wishes she were driving to swim practices or basketball games.

Otto is vocal about her losses on Facebook, where for the duration of October she made daily posts for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month.

"Unfortunately, recurrent loss parents will never be like everyone else," Otto wrote in one post. "They plan their days accordingly... For some, even the thought of going onto Facebook makes them cringe because they don't know how many announcements they will see that day. They may even unfollow someone who is