Birth Muse: The Birth Story of Eliza Michelle

Maria J. Brooks, CD(DONA), LCCE, FACCE

ABSTRACT

The author, a birth doula and Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator, agreed to attend the birth of a second child to a mother whose military husband was serving overseas. Because labor seemed to be progressing slowly, they waited at a hotel near the birth center. A very quick labor progression led to a rapid birth in the hotel, with the midwife still on her way. The author shares how learning to trust the power of natural childbirth helped her to remain calm and present for the mother for a once-in-a-lifetime moment.

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Do you have a birth story that illustrates the power of normal childbirth and encourages women to give birth with confidence?

We invite you to submit your story for possible publication in JPE. Please send your story or query to Judith Lothian, Associate Editor (jaloithian@aol.com). Also, check out the "Giving Birth with Confidence Blog" and "Normal Birth Forum" links at Lamaze International's Web site (www.lamaze.org).

Following is my story of the birth of Eliza Michelle, who was born Saturday, July 12, 2008, sometime around 9:00 a.m. All names have been changed to protect privacy.

Dear Eliza,

Your birth will not only always be special to me, but one I will never forget. I have no doubt that your story will be told to you over and over from different voices. So it is with great honor I share with you my perspective of your first moments. As the person blessed with the opportunity to witness your entrance into this world, I share this story of your birth with great respect and joy for the woman who gave birth to you—your mother.

I met your mom and Aunt Jane at a birth refresher class I taught and immediately felt a connection with them. Your father was serving in Afghanistan and, having military family myself, I could relate to the anxiety your mom must have been feeling. I also could relate to your Aunt Jane's excitement about being present at her niece's birth.

Everyone was ecstatic to be welcoming you to the family. I thought our goodbye that night would be the last I would hear from your mom, but to my delight she called a few days before your birthday to ask if I would be part of your birth as her doula. How could I refuse? These ladies were a lot of fun to be around!

Early on the morning of Saturday, July 12, your mom called to say she had been laboring all night and was ready for my presence. Though thousands of miles away, your father had booked a room at a hotel near the birthing center so we could be closer to the midwife. I agreed to meet your mom and Aunt Jane there, but before I was able to leave my home, your mom called back to say she had decided to go straight to the birthing center, because she felt her contractions were picking up and you seemed ready to come.

When I arrived at the birthing center, your mom was standing on the porch laboring, with Jane by her side. Your grandfather and grandmother were waiting in the car, keeping your dad up-to-date on the

phone; the military allowed him to call during your mother's labor and birth. Despite the great distance between them, your mom had the comfort and support that only a father can give. She mentioned on several occasions that she felt so connected to him, even without him physically being there.

The midwife arrived a short time later and welcomed us in the birthing center. She examined your mom and found that her cervix was only 2 cm dilated but 90% effaced. The center did not admit moms until they were at least 4 cm, and because we had a hotel close by, the midwife suggested that we go there and allow your mom to rest as much as she could. Your mom seemed disappointed, but she agreed to go.

Leaving the birthing center with your mom only 2 cm dilated, we headed to the hotel to wait for things to pick up. Your mom had been up all night laboring, so we thought it might be a good idea for her to try to sleep while the contractions seemed to be giving her breaks between. In the parking lot of the birthing center, the midwife encouraged your mom to rest and to call as soon as anything changed. At this point, I said, "Don't worry, I have no intentions of catching a baby." I remember thinking that was an odd thing to say, but dismissed it as lack of sleep. I later learned that when I said this, the midwife had a thought that I would indeed be catching you and perhaps should keep us at the birthing center instead of waiting for the 4 cm dilation. As we walked to the car, your dad called from Afghanistan and asked if we were sure we should leave. He said he had a feeling that we wouldn't have time to return. How right his instincts were!

When we finally got to the hotel, which was about 15 minutes from the birthing center, we helped your mom into the tub to help her relax, hoping she would get a little sleep between contractions. She only stayed in the tub a short time before she wanted to get out and lie on the bed. She rested on her side, and we wedged pillows around her, giving her support, and then she began to drift off. At the time, I had thought the contractions were slowing down after the all-nighter, but now realize this was most likely the lull before pushing began. The only complaint your mother seemed to voice was cramping in her lower belly, but she felt heat would do the trick and ease her pain.

Your mother kept asking if Jane and I had eaten, if we needed to sleep. So when she thought she would drift off to sleep, we agreed it would be a good time to get a bite to eat for all of us. Jane left first,

Despite the great distance between them, your mom had the comfort and support that only a father can give.

returning after 10 minutes with goodies for everyone. During that time, your mom and I talked about your dad and how he must feel being so far away, but how good it was that she was able to talk with him so much since going into labor. When Jane returned, I decided to step out and call my family to check in and grab a bite to eat for myself. I hadn't been out the door 5 minutes when my phone rang. It was Jane, who said, "She's pushing and wants to go now." I came right back, not sure what to expect after leaving her dealing with contractions gracefully and resting between them.

When I got to the room, your mom was on the toilet (almost a cliché for unexpected home births). I asked her what she was feeling. I squatted down in front of her and saw that her labia were flattening out. At that moment, my insides went crazy; I told her we needed to get up. She told me she couldn't and wasn't moving. I yelled to Jane to call 911. I then thought that if we called 911 and the medics came and took your mom to the hospital (the place she was trying to avoid), not only would your mother be separated from your father during this important time, but from you as well. It was a difficult decision, but I decided to trust that the midwife would come right over. I told Jane to hang up, and we called the midwife instead.

Knowing that it would be a while before the midwife arrived, Jane and I had to get your mom off the toilet. The drill sergeant in me came out, and I said, very forcefully, "Listen, you only *think* you can't get up, but you have to get up and get to this bed." What I didn't say was that if I was going to catch my first baby, I wasn't coordinated enough to do it over a toilet. Then, with the strength of the adrenaline we all shared, Jane and I lifted your mom off the toilet and onto the bed. We asked her to pant between contractions, as we prayed this would hold off the inevitable. At the next push, the labia opened, and I saw your head staying down under the pubic bone. I knew that having passed the pubic bone, you were all but home. I cannot explain the next part without using the words *divine intervention*.

I had always said I trusted birth, but this was going to call my bluff if I didn't make a move at that moment. I remember saying to myself, "Maria, in this room you are the only one who has seen this process done more than once. Trust birth, trust this

“Trust birth, trust this woman, trust yourself!”

woman, trust yourself!” I mumbled the prayer, “Father, be with us in this moment.” And I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Jane making the sign of the cross. It was in that instant I felt total peace and stillness in my soul. During what were only a few moments, I began to take a mental roll call of every birth I had witnessed. I returned to my childhood home, watching my cat give birth to five kittens and hearing my mom say to me, “Don’t worry, she knows what to do.” I returned to every birth I had the honor of witnessing through the years. I took a roll call in that moment, and everyone was there. (Thanks, ladies—and you too, Patches.)

Not having anything sterile, I washed my hands as thoroughly as I could and grabbed for the antibacterial gel I carry in my bag for my own children. Then, with a hot washcloth in hand, I applied counter-pressure to your mom’s perineum. I remember thinking, “Please stop, please,” knowing that this was an impossible request. Your head gently and slowly emerged, face down, and began doing a turn to the side when I realized the cord was wrapped not once but twice around your neck. I almost began to panic again. When I saw your little face, your eyes were open and you looked right at me, as if to say, “Hey, what’s the holdup? You know what to do. Now just do it.” Then, from the cell phone, I heard the midwife’s voice again (the cell line kept losing its signal). I said, “The cord is wrapped.” She replied, “From the back to the front.” Somehow, that broken signal made all the sense in the world. I did what the midwife instructed. Like a slipknot, the cord unwrapped, once, twice, and you slid out easily and gently.

The rush of adrenaline hit again, but this time my shaking was so bad I couldn’t hide it. You were so beautiful and so slippery that I couldn’t help but be thankful we were on a bed and not a tile floor. I couldn’t seem to find the strength needed to lift you to your mommy, so your mom and your aunt both reached down to help bring you to your mother’s bare stomach. I began to rub your back. Honestly, I really didn’t know if what I was doing was right; I

had only watched the nurses do it in past births. It seemed right when you let out the most beautiful cry I had heard in a long time. Now I could breathe, too! “Welcome to the world, little lady, what an adventure your life will be,” was my nervous response. We all laughed, but I knew that the placenta was my next worry, and I didn’t think that was one I could do on my own.

You seemed content and warm in your mom’s arms, so I watched mom and baby and prayed for no traffic for the midwife. Twenty minutes after the birth, the midwife arrived, and I couldn’t hold back my tears of relief. She immediately checked you and your mom and reported that you looked perfect and asked your mom if she was ready to deliver the placenta now that the cord had long stopped pulsing. Your moment on your mom’s belly helped massage the uterus and release the placenta without us knowing, and in return there was almost no blood loss. With one gentle push, the placenta was out and the cord was cut, freeing you to nurse.

I always knew this would one day happen to me, but I always thought it would happen with a midwifery instructor by my side. Now that I look back, knowing your mom and you were okay, I’m very glad my first catch happened this way. Had there been that voice saying, “Like this. . . no, try it this way,” I might not have had the opportunity to trust so completely this process I love. Birth not only makes mothers and fathers, it makes doulas, too. Thank you, Eliza Michelle, my little birth muse.

Warmly,

Maria J. Brooks, CD(DONA), LCCE, FACCE

AUTHOR’S NOTE

I am pleased to report that Eliza Michelle’s father returned home safely from Afghanistan, exactly 3 months after the day she was born.

MARIA J. BROOKS is a Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educator and DONA International Certified Doula practicing in New York City and Philadelphia. She has taught in two New York City hospital systems and offers a wide variety of education and labor support services in the Philadelphia metropolitan area (www.birthmuse.org).