Welcoming Nora: A Family Event

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ABSTRACT

In this column, Allison and Paul Walsh share the story of the birth of Nora, their third baby and their second child to be born at home. Allison and Paul share their individual memories of labor and birth. But their story is only part of the story of Nora's birth. Nora's birth was a family event, with Allison and Paul's other children very much part of the experience. Jane and Gavin share their own memories of their baby sister's birth.

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Do you have a birth story that illustrates the power of childbirth and encourages women to give birth with confidence? We invite you to submit your story for possible publication in The Journal of Perinatal Education. Please send your story or query to Judith Lothian, Associate Editor (Jalothian@aol.com).

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Walsh family—Allison, Paul, and their children, Jane and Gavin—share their individual perspectives of the night that Nora was born and welcomed into their family.

Allison

The day of Nora's birth started like any other day. Shortly after Jane (then 10 years old) and Gavin (then 7 years old) headed off to school with Paul, I realized that I felt extremely "out of it" and grumpy. Later that morning, I felt very distracted on a Lamaze board of directors' conference call, which fellow board member, Betsy Armstrong, later claimed to be her clue that I was in early labor. Personally, I had no clue myself. My first two labors were long, and I expected the same for this baby. There was nothing tangible that was happening, but I could not shake this feeling that a friend refers to as "general pissed-offness."

At 4:00 that afternoon, my midwife Cara came over for our scheduled prenatal visit. She had brought the tub we would use for the birth. We were 4 days from the estimated due date, so the time finally seemed right to add another item too big for our Manhattan apartment. After the usual exam and nice chat, Cara and I walked together to her car to get the tub. She insisted on assembling the tub instead of Paul doing it after work as planned. I asked her what was the rush for and said I did not want her to go to the effort. She told me that she would feel better if it was done. It was already 5:00 in the afternoon, and Paul would be home in an hour or so. We haggled back and forth, but Cara won in the end. She finally told me that she thought I would have the baby that night or the next day. With nothing happening yet, I remember laughing out loud and thinking she was crazy as we said good-bye.

Thus, with a smug chuckle and an intense craving for red meat and potatoes, I set out to prepare

dinner for the Walsh crew. An hour later, while I was serving the steak, roasted potatoes, and a vegetable that now escapes my memory, something inside me made me eat fast. After dinner and a proclamation that I would *not* do the dishes, I realized that I had thank-you notes that I desperately wanted to send out before the baby was born. There was such an urgency to write those notes. As my contractions began hard and fast, I furiously wrote. I tried to finish a note between each contraction, but that quickly became difficult. I told Paul that I was having strong contractions and gave him a list of what should be done. I am sure it was nothing actually important, but the control freak in me apparently had to have one last hurrah before the labor took over. I do remember insisting that he mail the notes when he went out to walk the dog. They simply had to be in the mail before the baby came!

By 7:00 p.m., we called Cara to tell her what was going on. I told her not to rush over, but that things seemed to be moving along. She got there around 8:30 p.m., shortly followed by three dear friends for labor support.

Paul

Our first daughter's birth was a great experience with a wonderful midwife in a hospital. We got pretty much everything we wanted: a natural birth and no real separation from our baby. However, many things came after a lot of advocacy. When I look back, it was really annoying. The staff seemed very condescending at times and their routines seemed silly. When we began planning for a second baby, Allison informed me that we could try all I liked, but she would not

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become pregnant until I agreed to a homebirth. I had reservations despite Allison's knowledge and experience as a childbirth educator and doula. She asked me to meet with Cara Muhlhan, a certified nurse-midwife whom Allison knew already. I asked all of my "what if" questions and immediately felt comfortable. As our second pregnancy progressed, I became more and more convinced of our decision to have a homebirth and of Cara's expertise, caring, and respect. Gavin's home waterbirth was nothing short of amazing. It was great to be at home where we were most comfortable, and to have 3-year-old Jane participate. She was a real mini-doula for Allison and an immediate excellent big sister.

When Allison was in labor with Nora, I felt completely comfortable because we had done it all before. I never felt nervous at either homebirth. I remember chatting with Cara when she arrived for Nora's birth. It was 8:30 or so in the evening. I asked if she had any sense of when the baby might come, and she told me that she thought it would be before midnight. Allison still seemed way too conversational and pleasant for me to really believe this. Given the many hours of our first two labors, I was skeptical.

Allison

By the time everyone arrived, I was in my own head. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of my friends arrive during a contraction, but I only remembered a while later to say "hello" and give her a hug. Everyone was so quiet and respectful. I knew Cara was going about her work getting set up, and I felt very taken care of. Just the presence of my friends, all experienced birthers themselves, gave me confidence. They had walked this path before. In fact, I had walked it with my friend Linda for her birth a few years before. Now, it was her turn to offer quiet reassurance and a calming presence. In addition, for the most intense part of my labor, Linda bent into the tub to offer Reiki, a therapeutic technique to reduce stress and promote relaxation. She was right with me, but in a very unobtrusive way. I remember opening my eyes after a contraction and looking at one or another of my team and just exchanging smiles and looks without saying any words. Heaps of trust and encouragement were passed along in this way, which I still cherish today.

Paul, Jane, and Gavin join Allison in welcoming Nora to their family.

I remember opening my eyes after a contraction and looking at one or another of my team and just exchanging smiles and looks without saying any words. (Allison)

Paul

As the next couple of hours went by, things stayed calm. Allison worked with the contractions, and she leaned on me and swayed much of the time. When the labor got more intense, I filled the tub with very hot water. I figured that it would be warm by the time Allison wanted to get in. I think I still believed that the labor would be long like the others because Allison was still so quiet and calm. Cara felt the water and said that we needed to pump out most of it because it would never cool down in time. She took over and pumped out the hot water and added cool water to get it right. It was not a minute too soon. The positions that had been working for Allison suddenly were not, and the contractions were very long and strong. Allison worried that it was too early, but Cara and our other labor supporters exchanged knowing glances and encouraged her to go for it. Unbeknown to Allison, they all agreed that the baby would be born by 11:00 p.m. It was now just before 10:00 p.m., and I thought they were crazy.

In between contractions, Allison was very relaxed. Jane took on a very motherly role, wiping Allison's face with a cold cloth as things got more intense in the tub. She was the perfect hostess and served cold drinks and a plate of fruit, cheese, and crackers to all of our guests. Gavin seemed to be most comfortable away from where the labor was happening. He told us he was happy to watch a movie in the living room away from the action. I did worry a bit that he might miss out on the experience of his mother's giving birth if he stayed out. Now I know that his coming in as Nora was being born was just perfect for him.

Allison

I hit the point in labor that many women experience where they feel like it will never end. At the same time, I felt silly because it had only been about 3 1/2 hours since my contractions began. With my first two births, I never had the real urge to push, which I had witnessed in so many women's labors. At that moment, I felt envious of those women whose bodies

just took over and pushed the baby out. I remember whining, "I wish I was one of those women who gets the urge to push. I never get it!" My friends love to tell that, within a minute or so of my speaking those words, the all too familiar, guttural, pushing voice came out of my mouth: "I'm *puuushhhing!*" One of my friends was on the phone in the living room and quickly hung up and ran in. She knew that sound!

I felt the baby move down quickly, and I panicked. As much as I was ready to be done, I did not want the baby shooting out! In another minute or so, the baby was crowning. I was on my knees in the tub, and Cara reached in to guide the baby's head out. At Gavin's birth, he hung around with his head out in the water for what seemed an eternity before his body was born. Cara joked about that now, and she asked if I might avoid doing that again. Paul enthusiastically agreed, but my body had other plans. Again, after Nora's head was born, her body took its sweet time in emerging. That moment brought me right back to Gavin's birth. It was a hard pushing phase, and I felt absolutely fine and happy after his head was out. I said that I could stay like that forever! The same wonderful feeling was there again—no pain, and pure bliss and relief!

My favorite picture of Nora's birth is me kneeling in the tub as I bring Nora up from the water. Cara's hands are in fists and remain on the bottom of the tub. It was truly my moment, as Cara stayed near to guide and guard us. It seems that my gang was almost right: Nora was born at 11:03 p.m., just over

Jane weighs her newly born baby sister, Nora, as Gavin and Allison react to the healthy results.

Jane took on a very motherly role, wiping Allison's face with a cold cloth as things got more intense in the tub. (Paul)

A cozy and delightful moment in bed, as Allison, Gavin, and Jane cuddle with Nora soon after her birth.

their prediction of 11:00 p.m. I could not believe that I had such a short labor!

When Nora was in my arms, Paul, Jane, and Gavin were right next to us. They could not wait to get a look at our new baby. Nora and I relaxed in the tub until after the placenta came, and then we moved to the bed where everyone piled in and around us. Linda made the best cup of tea I have ever tasted. We all enjoyed this comforting ritual when a lovely, strong rain began to fall. It was so cozy and delightful, with no one worrying about all that had to be done, like in the hospital.

Jane

I was at my brother's birth when I was 3 years old, but I do not remember that much. In the pictures, I was holding a cloth on my mom's face and giving her a drink as she was in the tub. During my sister's birth, I was 10 years old and so I remember more. I liked that she was born at home because we were all together, and I knew everyone who came. It would have been very different in a hospital. I doubt if I would have been able to be there. The whole thing was very relaxed and calm. I was not scared because no one else seemed to be. It was so cool to see Nora being born and to be with her right afterward. When it was time, I helped weigh and measure her. I also diapered and dressed her for the first time. My brother and I took turns holding Nora while Mom showered and got dressed. We were there with Nora for the first hour and a half of her life, and we were not happy to go to bed.

Gavin

I was born at home in the water, and I think it is good that my sister Nora was, too. I love when people are

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surprised when I tell them I was born at home. They usually think it was a mistake! When Nora was being born, I felt scared at times. I did not like the sounds my mom was making, so I stayed in the living room and watched a movie. Jane came out to get me when Nora was actually being born. I was nervous about going into my mom's room, and Jane sort of carried and put me on the bed. Then, Nora was born and I was glad I went in. She was covered in this cheesy stuff, and I asked my mom why she had lotion on her. In a minute, Nora was as pink as a little pig. We called her a "pink piggy" when she was a baby because of that. I loved being with her and holding her. She was so tiny and cute. I was so happy when my parents told me we were having a baby, and I was so excited she was finally there. I loved holding her that night and as much as possible when she was a baby. Now, Nora is a bit of a maniac, but we still have lots of fun together.

Allison

When preparing to write this article, I asked Jane and Gavin if they would like their children to be born at home. They both enthusiastically agreed they would. Gavin went on to say that it would have "stunk" if Nora had been born in a hospital instead of at home. I could not agree more!

ALLISON J. WALSH is a manager of parent education and lactation services at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. She is a past president of Lamaze International and serves as Lamaze's alternate delegate to the United States Breast-feeding Committee. PAUL R. WALSH is an attorney in the financial services industry and the proud and tired father of three. He loves to tell people, especially those he has just met, about his children's home waterbirths. JANE M. WALSH is a sixth grader in New York City. She plays volleyball, basketball, and softball for her school. GAVIN T. WALSH is a third grader in New York City. He is a prolific artist who also enjoys playing basketball and anything on the Wii.

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