

MY STORY



THE WILDERMAN FUND[®]
FOR MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

When these photographs were taken, I was suffering from severe Postpartum Depression, Anxiety, OCD, and PTSD from Traumatic Childbirth. I had not slept through a night in weeks because of my recurring nightmares about childbirth and being violated. I was having intrusive thoughts about my baby being hurt. I did not want to be a mother. I felt afraid, alone, humiliated, hopeless and detached. I wanted to disappear.

Yet this is the beautiful image of Motherhood



I suffered from the start. Before, during and after pregnancy with Benjamin, I felt afraid, alone, ashamed. But you wouldn't have known it. This is only a part of my story, about my Traumatic Childbirth and PTSD that will always be with me.



Michael and I had been married for just 3 months and moved to a new city where I didn't know a soul. Although Michael had a close group of friends, I had no family, and no support of my own. One week later, we learned that I couldn't get pregnant on my own. I felt worthless, undeserving of the life I had. Keeping silent even from my own parents, I became detached. I felt ashamed and alone on the inside.

Soon after our first anniversary, Michael's father died suddenly: it is a loss too tragic for words. Believing a son would help my family heal, I started the months of shots and suffering, got pregnant with a boy, but became consumed by debilitating paranoia and fear of a miscarriage, which symbolized failure to bring back life, replacing my family's grief with joy.

I became hyper-vigilant and obsessed with time, order, buying only the best pump, carseat, bottles, stroller, everything. I felt miserable, stressed-out, lonely. I never let anyone in, but things looked perfect. I attended events, hosted parties, volunteered; you would have never known. I normalized my feelings to anyone including my OB.

When I went into a 22 hour labor, the feelings of detachment, fear, humiliation, shame and silence took over completely. And here begins my story of my Birth Trauma and PTSD:

*Trigger warning: Men over my body, telling me to keep going, I was writhing to get out of monitor wires, breathless, defeated. Afraid I was doing it wrong, afraid of killing the baby if I didn't do what I was told. Ashamed of my naked helpless body but too embarrassed to admit it.

My eyes were puffy and almost sealed shut, I thought childbirth would be glamorous like the movies. Instead, it was dehumanizing, muzzled and caged like a monster, clawing into Michael's arms like a wild animal.

But everyone told me I was doing great and that

the baby was perfect. **BUT WHAT ABOUT ME?**

After he was out, I did not want to hold him but the nurse plopped the slimy little thing onto my chest and told me she would clean him up, so I could start breastfeeding and bonding.

But, the worst part: Childbirth ended with brutal violation and torture. I needed stitches. I was bleeding and couldn't move, I felt so afraid, and I remember my heart rate dropping. I wished they would have just let it go. The epidural had worn off, and I felt stick, after stick, and tying stitch after stitch. I didn't know I could ask for anesthesia, no one ever told me or thought about my needs above my waist. My hands crinkled the sheets, and I didn't know I could say anything, so I held back my tears. But the most damaging part, what has destroyed me most, after being so tightly sewn, I was told the placenta was not all out, so he was going to do a manual extraction. No one ever told me anything about that, so I thought it was okay or normal - but it was not. Then it happened. And happened again. Sticking his arm through my pelvis and shredded body parts to pull out remaining placenta. Horror. Silent screams. No options, no support, nothing but fear and pain. And I never resisted him because I was afraid I would disappoint him and he would get annoyed, and I could die, and the baby I didn't even want would have no mother. I didn't know I could say "No." That was my end. Not a mother but a gutted whale, slain and its parts harvested, left to die alone. I was violated, silenced, abused and tortured. **I HAD BEEN ROBBED. I WAS ROBBED OF THE JOY THAT COMES WITH BECOMING A MOTHER. A MOTHER, STRIPPED OF MY DIGNITY.** Victimized and left behind for the baby, believing it was my fault, that I was bad, and to just suck it up. People celebrated it because all they saw was my healthy beautiful son and family. When all I wanted was to die.

I just wanted to be alone, I hated it. No one protected me, my privacy, my sleep in recovery. I didn't know my experience was not normal. That

I didn't realize that this meant trauma for the woman, not the baby. Nurses and friends told me I was tired because of sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. But it was Postpartum Depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, ripped apart insides, depression, which became rage, which became illness. Who could celebrate this? It was devastating. Everyone told me it was beautiful and gushed over my baby, with the feelings I did not have.

Everything was wrong and got even worse. Weeks later, in throes of Postpartum Depression, I endured surgeries which included a D&C at 11 weeks after because his manual extraction didn't actually work. I felt like it was my fault that my body wasn't working right. Everyone told me it was an easy procedure and I would be so much better. All of this and I still had constant pelvic pain lasting for over a year. I was quiet, in pain, and had flashbacks of the delivery, recurrent nightmares and was overwhelmed to the point of fainting. But it all looked so glamorous on the outside! I went to parties, dinners, barre class all in smiles, but I wore a diaper and sitting down felt like broken glass. Everyone wanted to look at pictures of Benjamin and this made me angry, and I started to avoid people because I didn't want to talk about him. Then I'd feel guilty for not wanting to be with him, and I would rush home to be with him, but I hated being home and worried our nanny would think I was a bad mom. When I did hold him, sometimes it was nice, but those moments were short, and I would become frustrated and annoyed. I tried to fake it for him and was so afraid that my detachment would scar him for life. I did not know what was actually happening to me. I just knew it was not sustainable. I was so ashamed, I couldn't function or think clearly, kept it inside, and I wanted it all to just end.

***Trigger warning:** When I drove anywhere, most if not all of the time I thought about or visualized my death. Intrusive, irrational thoughts. When he was 6 weeks old, I feared he would run and jump into the pool, so I had an extra safety gate installed: he could barely roll over and couldn't even sit yet. What if I dropped him walking down the stairs?

A bridge became a diving board. Would I do it with Benjamin strapped to my body, or would I be alone? Once I walked across the George Washington Bridge just to see how high it really was. I became obsessed with death, but I never formulated a plan. Often, I went to bed hoping I would not wake up.

After 3 months of going to support groups that never worked, researching my feelings, suffering, I had to find help. Michael intervened. My sickness was ruling my life and ruining our family. He was so supportive in helping me find a local therapist who knew what was happening. I needed immediate, easy access to help: anywhere with traffic or a bridge and I would have intrusive thoughts of death and anxiety attacks.

And so, I thank Michael and all the powers in the universe for connecting me with the right therapist in the area. I have no idea what it would have been like without it. PMADs, like Mental Illness, are a medical and emotional problem. As a PMAD specialist, she educated me about it. She diagnosed and treated my PMAD, and, it became clear that underneath it all I had lived my whole life with undiagnosed mental illness, but pregnancy brought it out full force. With my diagnosis came the proper treatment plan, which she led with a team including a psychiatrist and endocrinologist, and connected with all of my doctors about my mental health. **I GOT BALANCED WITH THE RIGHT THERAPY, MEDICINE, AND SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR ME, AND I FINALLY FELT IMPORTANT.**

This is my PTSD. I live with it every day, but it doesn't define me. My experience is a testament to the dire need to collaborate in order to truly affect change.

But best of all, I connect with my brilliant son and incredible husband, and I have greater empathy. My heart overflows with love for Benjamin and Michael, and I am grateful that together we have finally attained our joy.