

Patti Pella: "Someone knows your life story"

Narrative 11 of the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project

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In 2008, we interviewed women about their experiences of childbirth and maternity care in Marathon, a rural community in north-western Ontario. This narrative is one of a series of stories that resulted from the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project. All of the narratives in this series were edited from the interview transcripts, then reviewed and approved for publication by the women involved. We invite readers to see the accompanying research paper for more on the Marathon Maternity Oral History Project.¹

I'm Patti Pella. I'm 41. Grace is 9, Thomas is 7, James is 3, and Michael is 1. All of them were born here. When we drive past this hospital, a piece of our family is here. I mean, they were born here, it just connects us to the community. My kids are growing up in a community with people that were the first people in the world that they saw. It's pretty magical. It just feels like our family's embedded in Marathon and someone knows your life story.

To be honest, we were nervous about having a baby in a small community. The family doc laid it all out. There was no pressure at all. It was, "Here's all the information you need to know. It's your decision. We'll support you however we can."

The idea of flying out if there was an emergency: I didn't look favourably upon that. I wanted to be rolled to another room, not flown to another town. I didn't know what to expect in terms of pain. We couldn't have epidurals, you know, very little in terms of pain. You hear of someone who had a particularly painful and uncomfortable delivery and then someone who had an epidural who says, "Well, I just kind of lay there and it came out." So you think, if it was particularly painful, I couldn't get an epidural here. I felt a bit guilty saying to [our doctor in Marathon] that we were seeing another practitioner, but they were totally supportive of that. They sent notes back and forth and everything, and I felt cared for in both places. Another thing for me, too, was family. My family is in Thunder Bay, so being accessible to immediate family to celebrate with us, that came into play as well.

I was vice-principal, my husband was teaching at the time, so we used [my pregnancy] as a teaching resource with our classes. The kids were really involved. I still have the laminated pregnancy calendar we blew up and put in class. You could put in your due date and it would generate a calendar so you know when the fetus is developing. It says arm buds or eyes or whatever is forming at the time. The kids were totally fascinated. They would feel the baby move and stuff like that. I had an open-door policy, the parents knew me, so I felt quite

comfortable, and a lot of the kids were having brothers and sisters and were curious about what was happening, so, it was a lot of fun.

Celebrity status at the hospital

My plan was to deliver in Thunder Bay and be monitored here in Marathon. We were a bit worried. However, when I went into labour, we were here, and had no desire to get into a car and go anywhere, so we had the baby here and it was wonderful and fine.

I'd woken up at about 3:00 in the morning; my water had broken and I just went up and got on the couch and lied down. My husband, Dan, came up in the morning.

"Why are you up here?"

"I think I'm in labour."

He went out and bought batteries.

I drove myself over to the clinic and they took a look. "Yeah, you're in labour. If you still want to go to Thunder Bay you can start driving now and probably be okay; there's hospitals along the way, you know." So just being in labour, I just felt comfortable. I think I really did want to be here, I was just a bit nervous. Everybody was relaxed and low key and said to me, "Okay, the next thing you can expect is ...," so there was a really clear plan. Around lunchtime, we went to the hospital and I got checked again, and they said, "You know, Patti, if you're more comfortable to go home and watch movies, come in when the contractions are this far apart." So, I did go home for a while and then it kinda hit fast. It's about a two-minute drive from my house, so very accessible. I had to push for 3 hours, and I didn't know any better. It was my first one and I thought that's what you did.

At that time, there weren't lots of babies being born in Marathon. It was like celebrity status at the hospital when you had the baby. When Grace was born, they said, "We'll take her so she can sleep."

Dan said, "No, we want her with us. We don't want her to be away." My husband wouldn't let her go, in case there was a mix-up, and it's like, "Dan, there's two babies born a month. There's no other baby here. You're okay." They

respected us with the breastfeeding; they really let me figure things out and supported me if I needed it. Dan felt a part of all the deliveries. He was the first person to hold her, and they let that happen. We were really excited as parents.

[My doctor] was down to earth, awesome, lots of fun, and it was a very positive experience. It was like he was as excited as we were about this baby coming along. He had 3 children of his own and just made us feel special at every visit. So did the people at the clinic. The Family Health Team is accessible and so human—my kids play soccer and hockey with their kids. You have close connections. There's this personal aspect beyond being a patient. I feel truly cared for here. It's a good and bad thing in some cases. The downfall is that I taught the nurse's children, so when I cursed during labour the first time, I said, "Oh, I'm really sorry. Forgive me." If it was anonymous, at that point, it would have been okay.

One good push and call it a night

By the second baby we had more confidence knowing that it was possible. I knew my pelvis could accommodate. I think that was my biggest fear: what if it gets stuck? All the things I was worrying about weren't even an issue any more. They just went away. It was very positive and we knew that's where we were delivering. We didn't even consider Thunder Bay for the second, third, or fourth. Not even a blink.

I delivered standing and squatting, hanging on to the hooks in the bathroom. No one said to me, "At this point you have to go here, or you have to go there." It just made the contractions more manageable. I was really supported. After I had Thomas, they had bars put up and actually had me come in to show where they could be installed as a comfortable place for moms. When the baby was born, the staff was just really, really excited for us, so that kind of made it fun too.

I think I pushed three or four times and then she [the doctor] says to me, "You know what, Patti? Two or three more pushes, and you're gonna have a baby."

"You're kidding! Hell, let's make it one good push and call it a night, babe." That's what we did. When we left the hospital with Thomas, we actually stopped and went

shopping for a couple little sleepers, and we were still home in 15 minutes.

Everyone gets a tragedy in their lives

I was pregnant between Thomas and James and we had a miscarriage. I was 14 weeks and just stopped feeling pregnant. That shouldn't go overlooked in terms of birthing story. I'd never bled during pregnancy so I knew it probably wasn't a good sign. When we went in the nurse kind of was assuming it was already a miscarriage, which was devastating to me. There was a locum in and he happened to be the doctor on call that day. He came in and said, "This is a prenatal." He just flipped it around and that mattered so much for someone to believe that it would be okay. I don't think he was being falsely hopeful, but without knowing what was going on, it mattered an awful lot. My husband and I went for coffee, and then went for an ultrasound. I knew. The bleeding had increased and I thought, "You know what, this is just not gonna ..."

I think everyone gets a tragedy in their lives, and that if this was it, it was painful and devastating and hard. I went to talk to one of the doctors and said, "I have this huge desire to get pregnant right away. That's exactly what I want; I want to be pregnant again."

Nobody shut that down. People I talked to said, "You should wait 6 months until you're in a good place."

"You know what, I just want a baby." So I did get pregnant again, but after a miscarriage I couldn't let myself get excited. Anything could happen. At 14 weeks, it was the due date of that other baby, so it was really weird. We're driving in the car and I said to Dan, "This is the date that baby was due." This baby is now past that 14-week stage. "Let's go buy maternity clothes and celebrate." It was going to be okay.

With each baby ... you're as humble as ever

My fourth, James, was the one that made me feel a little worried. I said to Dan, "I'm in labour."

"You can't be. I'm doing report cards."

James had a big head and he was almost 10 pounds. I think he got caught coming around the corner a bit. So I was a bit afraid. Just take me away and make it come



Canada Day 2013, Penn Lake Park, Marathon

out. I was lying there thinking, What if they fly me out? I talked to [the doctor] later on.

"You know, I was a bit worried about that one."

"Oh my gosh, you had nothing to worry about. It was a little bump in the road."

With each baby delivering, you're as humble as ever. It's you and this baby trying to work it out. Really, everyone else is there to offer what help they can, but I felt that in the middle of each one, like, "Oh my God, this is me. I have to get this child out." They'll do what they can to help, but no one's rescuing me here.

You know, they celebrate every birth that happens here. That's my baby, and I want people around me who are going to think it's magical. For me, it's that personal relationship. It's magical here. I know that, I feel that.

James had a reaction to his immunization at 15 months and seized. He was unconscious and turning blue on the table and the whole bit. It was probably the most traumatic thing, way worse than birth. I feel confidence in the person that helped deliver him being part of that care for him. [The doctor that delivered Thomas] came in. I had that connection. [She] was my anchor, my trust. I was just like, "We're gonna figure this out. We're gonna be okay."

Michael was the funniest one of all. He was overdue by about 2 weeks. The day I was supposed to be induced, it was cloudy, but they can only induce on clear days in case you have to be flown out. I was pretty bummed. [My doctor] said, "You can try cod liver oil."

What have I got to lose? My friend said, "What did you do that for? Now you're going to have really bad diarrhea and they're not going to deliver this baby and you're going to be tired from being up all night from the diarrhea."

Oh gosh. At about 8:00 that night, I started getting what I thought were diarrhea cramps, so I thought, "Okay, she was right, here we go." At 9:30, I went to the bathroom, I thought, "Good lord, I'm crowning."

I said to Dan, "We have to go to the hospital."

We got here at 10:00 and the baby was born at 10:20. That was after the nurses were saying, "Don't push 'til [the doctor] gets here." Yeah, right. [The doctor] came in and I said, "I think I might need drugs."

"Okay, we'll see what happens." That one was really quick. I think it was the slippery cod liver oil.

In the Jacuzzi ... having a ball

The other part about having babies in Marathon that I can't forget to mention is how amazing it is for siblings. Grace came to my prenats. She could come into the delivery room, but I just wasn't comfortable with that. Grace was 8 at the time and desperately wanting a sister. If it was another brother, we knew she'd be pretty

bummed out. She was just crying in her bedroom and my mom's like, "I don't know what to do."

"We need to get her involved and in love with this child."

We thought if she could come meet him, it might be easier. I said, "You know, Grace, I forgot to bring baby clothes. Do you think you could walk over?" Our house is just through the field from the hospital, so my 8-year-old and my 6-year-old walked to the hospital and brought baby clothes. That was a big independence moment for them. They got to walk over, pick out the clothes for the baby, and dress the baby. I have a picture of Grace walking into the room, her expression changes from glum that she has a brother, to sheer excitement. They're playing around the room so they investigated this big birthing tub.

"Mom, can we have a Jacuzzi?" Well, I didn't use it, so I thought somebody should. I felt comfortable enough being in this community that I could run the water, turn it on. So there they are, in the Jacuzzi, naked and having a ball, with their arms up on the Jacuzzi edge celebrating the birth of this new child. [The doctor] came right in the middle of all the hubbub, did what she had to do, said hi to each of them by name. Thomas says to me sometimes, "Do you think you could have another baby so we could go in that big tub again?"

I can have my babies here. That's powerful to me and I think it's powerful to the people who are considering moving to the community or starting families. It makes the community unique. It helps Marathon be the hub. Believe it or not, people come here to shop because we've got a variety of things that aren't available in White River, Manitouwadge, even Terrace Bay and Schreiber. It adds to the depth of the community. If Marathon could do C-sections and epidurals there would be even more babies born here. It's that issue of what-ifs that drives people to a centre where they can deal with that more effectively. They talked to the person who had been in labour for 30 hours and was seeing no progress, or ended up being flown out after a very long painful delivery. That tips the scale for people. If they ask me, I tell them these positive, very empowering deliveries that I've had. I questioned it with the first one, because I didn't have any proof, but I have 4 healthy, wonderful kids. I believe that it's safe. 🍁

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None declared

Reference

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