

Pregnancy and Infant loss not only breaks your body physically, but it breaks you emotionally - hopes and dreams for the future are dashed and in its place is confusion, hurt and pain. Our family knows this story all too well.

Our daughter was almost 18 months old and as a surprise for my husband's birthday we announced we were expecting again! A few weeks later, as I entered the ultrasound room with anticipation, excitement and wonder I never dreamed that in mere minutes our lives would be turned upside down - grief instead of joy. As I looked at the screen and saw a beautiful little baby I waited for the technologist to start pointing out the heart, completing measurements and confirming a due date...I didn't expect for her to ask if I had experienced any cramping or other miscarriage symptoms...what were miscarriage symptoms anyway? I had felt nauseous, tired, dizzy - all the same feelings I had in my first pregnancy. As she continued to then tell me that there was not just one baby but two I tried to follow the screen to see two miracles...grasping with the shock of carrying twins but then being told very coldly that there were no heartbeats in either baby was pure devastation. As I looked to my husband with confusion and my mind swirling with questions - questions the technologist couldn't answer, I could barely breathe. All I could think to ask was if we could have pictures printed of our babies. That was what you took home at your ultrasound right? I was still processing what she was saying and yet my mommy heart wanted so badly to have a picture of my babies. In one breath I was told it was against policy to print out photos where there was no heartbeat and that the bathroom was across the hall. It was as if time stopped...I couldn't speak, I couldn't argue, I was in shock...we both were. I remember looking around the room and seeing school pictures of two children, wondering if they belonged to this woman...how could she have pictures of her own children but I couldn't have pictures of mine? The pictures of my babies on that screen are forever formed in my mind...They, along with three more as we travelled the challenging road of grieving babies gone too soon.

We have been in larger centres and small communities over the last 9 years, we have had to learn to advocate for ourselves with medical professionals, seek out help on our own and try to ignore comments by family and friends that were hurtful and heartbreaking. I struggled with what I now know was Post Partum Depression after our second pregnancy loss and had to sit in a waiting room full of very pregnant women and newborns to see an OB to discuss how I was feeling. As she called my name to come to her office she exclaimed with a big smile on her face, "Do we have good news today?" I fell apart and cried throughout the appointment only to be told that I would be okay and it would take time. She obviously hadn't read my file or why I was there that day. I couldn't even drive home without pulling over on the side of the road to let go of all the emotions I was feeling - ignored, unconsidered, hurt, lost, alone...

I have had to practically beg a Nurse Practitioner for an early ultrasound, which my doctor had recommended, only to be told that it wasn't needed, that my anxiety about being pregnant wasn't a big deal and being asked if the pregnancy was planned and did I want the baby...this just weeks before we said goodbye to another baby. I then called the office in tears and asked to switch to someone else, when that request was denied I asked to be de-rostered from that clinic. The receptionist made me feel like I was a bad mom as my children would no longer have a local health care provider...but I just couldn't bring myself to see this person anymore.

Or when my husband was told he couldn't join me when I had a prenatal ultrasound with a suspected miscarriage, only to find out at the ultrasound that I was indeed miscarrying again. I

could barely walk down the public hallway to the waiting room where my husband was. We were then told we had to wait in the ER waiting room to see a doctor to confirm the loss, there was no private place to wait, we asked for one...surrounded by people we knew who were there for colds and stitches...holding it together as they asked why we were there...an agonizing two hours. As we walked to our vehicle after the miscarriage was confirmed I clearly remember telling my husband, "How do people go through this on their own?". I could list other things people said and what they did or didn't do...yet at some point you have to forgive and realize that they just didn't know what to say or do. Grief does that, it's confusing for everyone and nobody knows what to do or say. They just didn't know and for many medical professionals it was all too common a situation.

There have been positives for sure, kind nurses, lab tech's and doctors who took the time to offer kleenex, allowed us private space, a phone to use, walked us to the office when we were lost in a new hospital on the way to a D & C procedure and held my hand as I cried waiting to go into surgery, midwives I had never met who listened to me as I cried feeling blame, shame and confusion. During my pregnancy with our second daughter we found a true friend in our now family doctor. This woman walked through two pregnancy losses with us, which included our last in 2012 at 16 weeks. She cancelled a personal appointment and made arrangements on the fly to get us the best care possible as we were on the way to a family vacation, she offered to watch our two daughters so that my husband could be with me at the OB's office, she came to the Pre-Op room as I waiting alone to hold my hand, let me cry and listened as I told her that I felt this would be my last pregnancy. That year was a hard one as I again dove into Post Partum Depression, trying to care for two young girls when I could barely care for myself - thankfully I was a stay-at-home mom at the time and my husband was able to work from home and help with the girls. I am a College Professor and there's no way I could've pulled myself together enough to be back in the classroom...I couldn't even wash my dishes without crying. During this time our doctor offered care and support that brought us through as a family and continues to support us and our endeavours to help others. She is truly someone special.

In 2013 friends said goodbye to their son at 19 weeks gestation. It was heartbreaking and flashbacks of our own experiences came flooding back. And yet I wanted to offer care and support. I found Hope Mommies, a non-profit in Texas that produces Hope Boxes for families that have experienced pregnancy and infant loss. A small group from our church collected special items to create our first Hope Box to be given to this family, this group then suggested we make more boxes. Within two weeks we had collected enough funds to create 20 boxes to have on hand when needs arose. Boxes filled with love, care, support and grief resources for the journey. Encouragement that these families know their babies were special and created for a purpose, their lives mattered. We are continually updating the boxes to include items for dad and other siblings as well, ways other family members can care, online and local resources and support, songs and ways to remember our baby, book about grief, journal, Bible with 50 encouraging verses highlighted, stained glass "Hope Heart" that they can hang as a remembrance and more. Something to give a family when they feel utterly alone. Something to fill their empty arms in the middle of the night.

What I didn't realize in the beginning, was that we weren't alone at all, 1 in 4 pregnancies end in some type of loss...friends, family members, medical professionals from the community were then asking for boxes for friends, family and clients. Since 2013 we have provided close to 1000 boxes across the Country with over 30 Hope Box Teams and Hope Box Ambassadors sharing hope, care and love. Each team is lead by families who've experienced the loss of a baby -

whether that be at 6 weeks, 20 weeks, 36 weeks or 6 months - the loss of a baby is devastating and life changing. Other family members have gotten involved as well - aunts, grandmas, cousins...the loss of a baby impacts everyone in a family. To create the boxes we hold Hope Box Packing parties - families from our church and community come together to place items into the boxes and sign cards that are included in the boxes. Personal notes of support and encouragement. Community members create little blankets and cards to be included. A gift that shares love and that the family isn't alone. Through our connection to Hope Boxes my husband and I (he's a pastor), have been called on to perform funerals for beautiful sweet babies, sit with grieving families in the ER, listen to families share their stories - and cry along with them as our hearts break that another family has to walk the road we know too well. We have heard from countless families who's hearts have been broken and dreams lost, families of all ages, sizes and circumstances. From the teen mom with a full-term stillbirth, to the sixty year old woman who never had a place to say goodbye to her baby - we've seen and heard it all. As an expansion of the Hope Box program we've also now begun creating a Garden of Hope, a place that families can come and place a stone in memory of their baby. A safe, beautiful, calming place to remember and know they aren't alone.

When we held our first packing party my oldest was 5 years old and was determined to write her name in each of the 20 cards. Since then my girls have helped pack hundreds of boxes, writing their names and drawing little hearts for the other "sad mommies". They know that they have five siblings in Heaven and we talk openly about grief and loss. They also know that "sad mommies" don't need to stay sad and they've watched our family turn mourning to joy, despair to praise and be restored, revived and renewed. Our babies are part of our family story, and we want our girls to be champions for those that are going through tough, messy stuff. To grieve well.

It is our desire as a family and through Hope Box Canada is that other families be able to have the time they need to process, to heal physically and emotionally, to be able to be restored, revived and renewed - to grieve well and to thrive. To take away the stigma that grief holds. Having the space and time to do this is an incredible gift that can only lead to wellness and a better community.

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