

Stillbirth Happens – let's talk Podcast

Finding My Voice: Parenting James and Zachary

Released July 2, 2025

This episode begins and ends with Jaime's story about the stillbirths of her sons, James and Zachary and is about love, loss, and the long, often quiet, journey Jaime took to find her voice. In between the segments of Jaime's story, we hear from Dr. Astrid Christofferson-Deb, an obstetrician-gynecologist at BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre, who shares how care providers can support families through stillbirth by offering care, courage and strength.

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Erin Bohn 0:00

Welcome to our podcast, *Stillbirth Happens - let's talk*. My name is Erin Bohn, and I'm a proud mother to three children. My daughter Gracie is 17 years old; my daughter Ryann would have been 15, and my son Quinn is now 13 years old.

Jaime Ascher 0:27

My name is Jaime Ascher, and I'm also a mother to three. My daughter Marissa is 20 years old. My son James was stillborn in 2010, and my son Zachary was stillborn in 2013. Erin and I met at a conference and have been friends ever since. Our shared identity as bereaved parents and our commitment to support other families whose lives are touched by stillbirth has bonded us forever.

Erin 0:58

Jaime and I are here to help you feel less alone. We are working to break the silence around stillbirth. As Jaime and I know, personally, stillbirth happens, let's talk.

In this episode of *Stillbirth Happens*, it's time for us to hear from my co-host and friend, Jaime Ascher, as she shares how she found her voice through her stillbirth journeys of her sons, James and Zachary.



Jaime 1:27

You will also hear from Dr. Astrid Christofferson-Deb, who is an obstetrician/gynecologist at BC Women's Hospital. Dr. Astrid shares what it means to support patients through stillbirth, loss and subsequent pregnancies.

Erin 1:45

Wow, wow, wow. I'm excited for this one, Jaime, I really am. We met back in 2013 riding that silly little elevator, and here we are...

Jaime

We did...

Erin

...and I am so thankful I get to interview you! Can you share your beautiful boys and even your beautiful daughter?

Jaime 2:06

Sure, I'm super excited to be on this side of the microphone today, I guess, to be sitting here and just having a conversation with you, Erin. So, my husband and I started our journey of building our family soon after we got married, and infertility was part of that journey right from the start. Three years after we were married, we were expecting our first and our daughter, Marissa, who is almost 20 years old. She was born at 33 weeks, and she was a NICU baby. And then it took us five more years to conceive again.

We conceived our son, James, who was stillborn in March of 2010. That experience was one I didn't even know existed. I didn't know the word stillbirth, we had signs that there were difficulties in our pregnancy from the 12-week ultrasound and then the 18-week ultrasound and the next five weeks of MFM visits. And so it was a very monitored pregnancy, and James passed at 23 weeks and was stillborn. And it was a very, ah, isolating, lonely experience for us. I had all of two hours with my son. I believe that's about how long we were at the hospital after he was born, and so it was just a whirlwind. So much - a lifetime - to put in with him in those couple of hours. In the years after, I had a really hard time, I lived in darkness for a long time. I mean, I was a mom, so I had to get up every day and be a mom to my daughter, but they were very difficult years, for a good couple of years.

4:19

We eventually decided to have another child, and in the end of 2012, I guess is when we conceived, or Zach was born in June of 2013, and he too was stillborn. It was a completely different pregnancy than with James had been and actually with Marissa, he was my healthiest pregnancy. Things were going very well. I had a couple of extra scans. I had a very caring OB

who was very receptive to reaching out if I needed to. I believed eventually that everything was going to be okay. For a long time, I didn't allow myself to be excited or connect...

Erin 4:47

Right

Jaime

...with Zach. But anyhow, June of 2013, Zach was stillborn.

Erin 4:53

Do you remember how many weeks Zach was when he was stillborn?

Jaime 4:57

So he was exactly the same as James, and it was 23 weeks.

Erin 5:02

So from James to Zachary, how was it that you processed your trauma? If you don't mind talking about James first and just describing what it was like - what happened?

Jaime 5:21

Sure. So, with James, like I said, we had indications there appeared to be less amniotic fluid than was normal. When I asked that question, what does that mean? The answer I got was, well, we're not sure, we'll just monitor it. And that was all I got for that until the 18-week, and then it was clear that he was smaller than he should be and so we went through a lot of different testing, and it was clear that he had some developmental difficulties and would if he were to live. And so, we were counseled about termination.

Erin 6:00

Right.

Jaime 6:01

And had a decision to make by a certain time period. But it's something that my husband and I continually talked about, and we didn't make it to that time period - and so James passed before that final decision had to be made, but that was very much a part of the discussion with him. And so, we had indications that he may die, but nobody can predict and so it did happen.

With him it was all shocking. With my daughter, I had a c- section, so I delivered James vaginally, so I had never been through that, and just the vibe in the room when he was born, yeah, it just was truly sadness and shock. And after he was delivered, we got moved up to a



different unit, and I had to ride in a wheelchair. I remember I was holding him, with a blanket, covering him. And with him, like I said, I didn't know much, and we spent a couple of hours with him, and then we said goodbye and we left the hospital. I didn't know anybody. I didn't meet anybody...

Erin 7:21

Meet anyone who had had...

Jaime

Yea...

Erin

...who had also had an experience...

Jaime

yeah, yeah. It was just, it was such a lonely and isolating experience.

Erin 7:31

So, you gave birth to James in the labour and delivery unit?

Jaime

I did.

Erin

What unit were you moved to, Jaime?

Jaime 7:40

Ah, what is that called? I think it's called the antenatal unit.

Erin

Okay.

Jaime

Yeah. So, we had the room, I suppose for as long as we wanted to be there, but there wasn't a whole lot of guidance. And so, left with more questions than answers, and so went into this period of of darkness, really is how I call it.

Erin 8:05

And then after those couple of years, when you found out you were pregnant with Zachary, what were those initial feelings like when you found out you're pregnant? How did you decide that you were going to try again too?

Jaime 8:19

Well, we always knew we wanted... to be honest, I wanted four kids. So, we always knew we wanted a big family. I wanted a sibling for our daughter, a living sibling. So that was something that we decided to try. And so eventually, again, we did get pregnant, and I was, how do I describe it? I'm not even sure I would use the word excitement. I was terrified, yeah, is really the word that I would use. I knew what we had been through. I mean, I had a care team behind me who had counseled us through those years, but also leading up to the pregnancy and talking about, you know, what would we do different. So, I knew that they were on things, and so I learned over time to get a bit more excited. But I hadn't bought Zach anything. We hadn't even talked about getting a nursery started or getting something together for him. That just wasn't something I was willing to embark on.

Erin

Yup...

Jaime

...but I was thrilled that he was on the way. But, yeah, I just wanted him to get here safely,

Erin 9:33

Right. And you had more doctor's appointments...did you have more specialist appointments, anything?

Jaime 9:38

Well, just the care team that I had, I was followed by a high risk OBGYN. I can remember there was one time I just felt different one day and I couldn't feel Zach move, and I just felt off. And so she had always told me, just go to the hospital and we can get things checked. And so I went, she was actually there that day. I can remember, in the ward where you where you go in at the hospital, the nurses couldn't find a heartbeat, but they said, you know, we'll go get the doctor and the doctor happened to be mine. And she came and she found his heartbeat, and she showed me the picture, and she was like, there he is, Jaime. And I can remember this moment because it was like his hand was lifted up, and it was like he was waving at me. And I will never forget that moment, because that was one of the only times that I saw him alive. But she went the extra mile that way. And...



Erin 10:38

Yeah...

Jaime

...even after that incident, like the amount of times I saw her, and just my 20-week scan, the words "perfect" were actually used that everything was well on its way. And I think at that point, I started to breathe a little bit easier, knowing that, you know, we were, we were almost through that, what I call the scary time period of comparing that with his brother's...

Erin 11:01

...with James...

Jaime

... pregnancy, yeah, and he was growing as he should, and he was the size that he was supposed to be. All indications were that everything was good. And then they weren't.

Erin 11:11

At the 23-week mark?

Jaime 11:15

Yes. I went to the doctor for an appointment, and couldn't find his heartbeat in the office, and then had to go to the hospital for a confirmation. I drove myself from the doctor's office to the hospital. It was like, okay, they found it one time, they can do it again. I was just in my mind, like, it's going to be okay. Yeah, I remember calling my husband, you have to meet me there, but yeah, just believing that it was going to be okay.

Erin

Right?

Jaime

And that wasn't the case. Confirmation at hospital ultrasound was that there was no longer any heartbeat, and he was no longer with us.

Erin 11:55

Were you thinking, how in the heck can this happen twice? Or were you only focused then on Zachary?



Jaime 12:18

Yeah, I think that we were truly blessed with an amazing MFM doctor in the room with us that day. She clearly had read my chart and knew that this was not our first and I didn't have to be the one to share that with her, so she knew.

Erin 12:37

Good.

Jaime

I think it was just so surreal, I didn't want to believe it. My husband was just holding my hand and just, I think he was in shock too. He hadn't been in the doctor's office, so I had had a head start with that. And I asked to see so she showed me, and then she got up and she gave me a hug, and she cried too.

Erin 13:02

So not only was she there professionally, she was there as a human...

Jaime

Yes

Erin

...sharing in the loss.

Jaime 12:51

Yes, and it just, I think from that moment, the trajectory was so different from our experience with losing James and our experience with losing Zach.

Erin 13:02

What was it about your doctor showing that human side started you on a different trajectory of your story with Zachary?

Jaime 13:13

I just felt like Zach mattered.

Erin

Mmmmmm

Jaime



His loss was profound, and she acknowledged that. And much of the time with my experience with James, I didn't feel like he was acknowledged as

Erin

As a person...

Jaime 14:03

...as a person.

Erin

Mhmm.

Jaime

Yeah. So, from that room, then we got taken to a different room for different people to come and talk to us. And I can remember not wanting to stay at the hospital at that point, I needed to go talk to our daughter before delivering. But I remember, before I left, a social worker came in, and one of my biggest questions was, how do I tell our daughter, who, at the time, had just turned eight years old - and she had already lost a brother this same way - how do I tell her for a second time that her brother's not coming home, and that social worker looked at me and said, you're the one that's going to have the words you've experienced this before. And I think I was angry in that moment. I wanted that help. I wanted, like, tell me what I should tell my child.

Erin

Right.

Jaime

But again, she empowered me to dig in and reminding me that I would have the words.

Erin 15:05

You're in control.

Jaime

Yes. So, we stayed at home that night, and then we went back the next day. I was so angry. I'm not typically an angry person...

Erin 14:42

You're really not!

Jaime 14:44



So, I think back to that time I just wanted to take all my dishes and throw them on the ground. So yeah, anger was a huge part, probably that night, sadness, grief, but really, I think also a lot of contemplating, like, okay, what's this going to look like? I know what it looked like last time, and that didn't work. And so how can we make it look different? So, I think I went into planning mode, if that even makes sense.

Erin 15:13

It does to me, Jaime, it really does. I get that...

Jaime

Yeah.

Erin 15:18

...the planning mode, planning your son's birth.

Jaime 15:21

Planning his birth, planning our hospital stay. You know if we were going to invite people to come and meet him, because I knew what was to come, because I'd already been there. It was planning for that day. And that probably helped me get through that night before going back to the hospital.

Erin 15:44

Having the time to process.

Jaime 15:46

Yes

Erin 15:47

This is the first time I'm hearing this. So, did you plan the delivery of Zachary? Did you chat out any of these things with your husband? Or was it you up all night pondering, right? Because just because you've had one stillbirth doesn't mean the next stillbirth is going to look the exact same.

Jaime 16:08

Yeah. So, there was definitely conversation. My husband and I talked about it. I probably didn't share at all. There was probably lots going on in my head that I didn't share. So, one of the things that I really, really wanted, and it would depend on and when he was born, like how long labour went, and that kind of thing. But I had never spent a night in the hospital with my baby in my room with me. My daughter was in the NICU, so she was never in the room with me.

Erin 16:39

Wow

Jaime 16:39

James, I had him for two hours, you know, between nine and eleven in the morning, that's the time I spent with him. And so, I knew that I wanted more time and be at the hospital with him overnight. But yeah, and the other big discussion was, would we bring our daughter to meet Zach, because she didn't get to meet James. And she had some attachment issues and some anxiety issues whenever I would leave in the years following James's loss, and I attributed that partially to well, to the loss, to who I became after the loss, and the different mom that she had before and after. And we decided we'd ask her if she would like to meet him, we weren't going to force it on her. And her instant response was yes! Yes, I want to see him, I want to meet him. Because James was just an abstract thought to her. I know some people, they probably wouldn't have done that, but we did what felt right for us, and we asked her, and she wanted to, and we made it a very safe place for her. And I will say that that's probably one of the hardest but also best parenting decisions that we made. My favourite picture that will always be my favourite picture is a picture I have of my daughter and Zach. I have a picture with two of my kids together. That's the only picture I have with two of my kids. And she is smiling, and she is playing with his fingers. She got to meet her little brother. And that moment will always be there. And he, too, became real to her, and she understood that, yes, indeed, she has a brother. She has two brothers. Those moments were so important. My parents also drove down, and they met Zach, my mother-in-law met Zach, a friend of mine met Zach; they miss him too. And he had an impact on our lives.

Erin

Absolutely

Erin 18:48

And now, let's meet Dr. Astrid Christofferson-Deb.

Astrid Christoffersen-Deb 19:15

My name is Astrid. I am an obstetrician gynecologist working at BC Women's Hospital, and in that role, I also work at South Community Birth Program here in Vancouver, which is a collaborative maternity program. I know that recurrent stillbirths can happen, and certainly if you, yourself have gone through a stillbirth, you feel the whole time that this will happen again. For most of us, we will dismiss that and say, no, that was just a one off, this pregnancy is going just fine. But there is recent research that has shown that in high income countries, when they look at people who've had a first stillbirth, they actually are more likely in their next pregnancy to either have another stillbirth or to have a complication in pregnancy, such as delivering



prematurely or having a pregnancy that has something called growth restriction, or the baby may not grow as optimally as we might want, or needing to be delivered by emergency c-section or having what's called an abruption when the placenta unsticks itself a little bit early. And so, I go into a next pregnancy trying to be hyper-alert to the possibility that there might be another stillbirth that may take place, and also that there can be some unexpected complications. I keep my medical hat on throughout and ensure that we have the tools available to follow that pregnancy and ensure that things are progressing in the way that we want.

20:

And I really do try and validate the pregnant person's fears and not dismiss them. Instead, I often think about that you are going down that road and you are reliving that whole journey that you have just experienced in a prior pregnancy. And so thankfully, you know, although you are at higher likelihood of having another stillbirth, especially if that previous stillbirth was between 20 to 28 weeks so the earlier ones. More commonly, what I see people through is they've had a stillbirth, and then their subsequent pregnancy, maybe pregnancy losses that take place before 20 weeks, what we call a miscarriage, or they have a complication that develops, and all of this, what I think about always is just providing accompaniment. You may have more scheduled visits, especially around the time when the previous losses took place, I make sure that I remember that in March of last year you had this loss, and we went through this. Because certainly, what I have learned from people is that they are always remembering and having someone else share with them that memory, that worry, that sense of dread that this might happen somehow, I think, makes it easier. And also, as a clinician, as a physician, it makes me feel like I'm doing the right thing by paying attention and anticipating what their needs might be during those times.

22:19

And I'm so grateful to be within a team in which you can pull on a counselor, you can pull on a lactation consultant, lactation nurse, a nurse practitioner who can sit with you for longer appointments after you've seen the specialist, there is a midwife that may be able to follow you through your subsequent pregnancies. That helps a lot, and also makes it feel as though we are so much stronger individually, because we're coming into that room to see you as a collective. Much of our obstetric care system is slowly shifting to a team-based model, and I will say that anyone who is going through a pregnancy where there may be some challenges will certainly speak to the fact that wraparound care is invaluable.

23:14

One thing I do share, probably at every encounter with someone who's had a stillbirth at some point in their journey is I share the story of the double arrows. It exists in many different traditions, including several First Nations communities, but it's also heavily rooted in the



Buddhist tradition. The initial arrow that might strike the heart and that is painful, and that might be the initial loss. But what can really kill us, and what can really be devastating and really make things difficult for us to feel like ourselves again, is that second arrow that we throw at ourselves, where we question, are we meant to be a parent? Am I ever meant to have a pregnancy again? Everyone else is pregnant, there must be a reason that I am not meant to have a baby or to have a healthy birth. And so, I really invite people, when we're sitting together, to acknowledge these arrows that we throw at ourselves. And one of the things that I've learned is that it's really hard to say, don't do that, but what can be really helpful is to sit and think together. What are the things in which you feel love?

24:35

So, I invite people to think about someone that they care about, and we might sit and then close our eyes, take a few deep breaths, and I invite them to think about wishing that person well, wishing that person to feel cherished and loved, wishing that person to feel safe, and wishing that person care, courage and strength. And after we've done that, I might invite them to think about someone they might not know as well and do the same practice. Let's think about wishing that person well, wishing that that person feels cherished and loved and safe and with time and practicing this over and over, what we learn is that we're finally able to bring up an image of ourselves and wishing those same things for ourselves. And it's certainly not at the first encounter, it might be several visits in which we finally might get to a point, and sometimes it might only be in the time of the next pregnancy, where we might be able to finally get to a point where I might invite you to bring up an image of yourself and really wish yourself well, wishing that you feel cherished, wishing that you feel loved, wishing that you feel safe, wishing yourself courage, and may you feel strong and loved as you go through life. And it really helps then for those arrows to start pulling themselves off of your heart.

Erin 26:03

And now, back to my conversation with Jaime.

Jaime 26:09

It wasn't until a year later that I went to a conference down in the States where I met another mom who had experienced stillbirth twice. And to this day, we're still in contact, and she is the only person that I have ever personally met that her and I just clicked. Having experienced it twice, I went through a period of time where I didn't feel comfortable, even in the stillbirth world, because I felt like when people got pregnant, they would, if I shared that it happened twice, I just felt like people didn't wanna hear...

Erin 26:48

Didn't want to hear that!



Jaime

...ya, didn't want to hear that.

Erin 26:51

Yeah, but finding your person. How did you change the way you looked at grief, looked at your journey of going through the grieving mucky waters?

Jaime 27:02

Yeah, that's a good question. I don't know the how, I just know that when this all happened, it was, it was a conscious decision. And I can remember looking at Chris, my husband, and just saying, I can't go back there. I can't do that again. There has to be another way. And like I said, it started there in the hospital, that night that I got to spend with Zach. I sang him lullabies. I, like I have memories, I read him a story, and I always say James gave me courage to want to have another child, and Zach gave me strength. So, to have both of them have been giving me those has led me and has guided me through all of these years. But that time period in particular. I just knew I had to do it different. Going to that conference, meeting people, finding a community, becoming involved. It was sort of a non-negotiable. It happens. It happened to me, and that's what I needed at that time. That's what...

Erin 28:05

What you knew...

Jaime 28:06

...that's what I knew, I guess, what I knew is I didn't want to do it again.

Erin 28:13

Yeah. Okay, so Jaime, I have been wanting to ask you this question, and I want you to answer it as a mom. Years out from all three of your kids, what did you learn from all this?

Jaime 28:26

Oh, boy, what did I learn? I think, one, that we can plan all we want, but it doesn't always work out the way we plan, and we have to learn to pivot. But I also learned that I can parent all my kids, no matter if they're here or not, and that is really why I have done the work that I've done in the stillbirth world. It has given me tangible ways in which to parent my boys. I am their mom. I was their mom the moment I found out about them, and I will be their mom until I'm no longer here. We learn to cope, and we learn that there's hope in life, and we can learn to embrace each of our kids in whichever way that we have them.



Erin 29:18

You know what I hear, Jaime, from the moment I met you in 2013 to now, you were so quiet. And I think a lot of us brave moms go through that because we don't want hurt other people, but we all have our own beautiful stories of our kids. And one thing that I've absolutely noticed from you, from 2013 when I met you in that dang quiet elevator, till now? Girl, you've found your voice!

Jaime 29:44

Yes, yes, I have that comes from the experiences that I've had. And yes, I agree with you. I have found my voice, and I can thank all of my kids for that.

Erin 30:02

Thank you so much for listening and spending time with us.

Jaime 30:05

This episode of *Stillbirth Happens - let's talk* was produced by the Hummingbird Project of BC Women's Hospital + Health Center. It was produced by Jasmine Coleman.

Erin 30:15

If this episode resonated with you, we invite you to take care of yourself in whatever way feels right, whether that's by accepting support, setting boundaries or connecting with others who understand.

Jaime 30:29

You can find information, resources, connections and ways to take care of yourself in the show notes of every episode and on our website. Go to bcwomens.ca and search for stillbirth happens.

Erin 30:41

To stay connected, follow us and drop us a comment or a review on Spotify or Apple podcasts, we truly do love hearing from you.

Jaime 30:51

Thank you again for joining us. Until next time, remember to be gentle with yourself; you're not alone.