

Stillbirth Happens – let's talk Podcast

Memorializing: Bringing Ryann Home

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In this episode, Erin shares the story of her daughter, Ryann, who was stillborn in 2010 reflecting on the choices her family faced and the journey of bringing Ryann home from BC to Manitoba. Funeral director Nathan White joins the conversation to explain how funeral homes can support grieving families after stillbirth. Together, Erin, Jaime, and Nathan highlight the importance of memorializing babies who are stillborn and ensuring families receive the care and compassion they deserve.

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Jaime Ascher 0:01

Welcome to our podcast, Stillbirth Happens - let's talk.

Erin Bohn 0:09

My name is Erin Bohn, and I am 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 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.

Jaime 1:16

In this episode you'll hear from our very own Erin Bohn as she shares the story of her daughter Ryann who was stillborn in 2010.

Erin 1:23

Then you'll meet Nathan White, a funeral director in Minnedosa, Manitoba. He shares how he supports families through stillbirth with compassion, flexibility and a commitment to honouring every life, no matter how small.

Jaime 1:17

Erin, I've so been looking forward to talking with you today. You and I have known each other for almost 12 years, and over that time, we've shared so much of our babies. So, I'm happy that I have the chance to interview you today and have you share with us about Ryann in those first days and weeks after her stillbirth. You made some incredible decisions in those very early days of grief, and we're going to talk about those that led to Ryann's burial and other ways in which she was and is memorialized in your family. Take us back to June of 2010, and share with us about your beautiful girl.

Erin 2:16

Mmmm, I love that we're having this talk. Ryann's due date was June 15 of 2010. The week before that, I was in at my doctor's appointment. My husband at the time, he was away working. My mom was still in Manitoba. They were both coming in on the same day. So, my amazing birth doctor, he didn't want to do an internal on the Friday when I saw him. Ryann's heart rate was 147. It was a completely boring pregnancy. Everything was looking good the whole entire way through. He just told me to take it easy on the weekend and to come back in and see him on the Monday morning. I went in and saw him after my mom flew in, my now ex-husband was home, and when I went in with my mom to the doctor's appointment, they couldn't find a heartbeat. He was a teaching specialist, a teaching doctor, so I had, um, a student doctor, working on me at the time, and he couldn't find the heartbeat. And my doctor went to go and try and find the heartbeat, he couldn't find it. So, I went down to the lab and had an ultrasound done, and that's when he told me that there was no heartbeat on Ryann. And that was three days before her due date, after no complications the whole pregnancy.

Jaime 3:56

What a shock that was that morning, after just having heard her heartbeat on Friday.

Erin

M-hm

Jaime

And so, what happened next?

Erin 4:06

Huh, what happened next. In all honesty, Jaime, I did what I now know that I do. I completely shut down. When they couldn't find the heartbeat, I was just thinking it was fine. With my first daughter, Gracie, they also couldn't find her heartbeat at one point. And I went and I ate some food, and it got her moving and whatever. I didn't know what to do. Looking back now, I definitely shut down and 100% disassociated with my connection with Ryann. I was in complete

shock. We knew we had to go home and tell my ex-husband there was no heartbeat. I actually don't remember the drive home at all. I did not know what to do. It was very quiet. Any phone calls we made, people were, because it was so close to the due date, they were expecting to hear that a baby was born. So that was extremely hard to make all those phone calls. In all honesty, I don't actually remember who did all the phone calls. I'm gonna assume my mom. And I just kind of quietly retreated. And anybody who knows me knows I am not quiet. So, it was hard to get the news across to people. It was hard to navigate the phone calls because I really didn't want to talk to anyone that first night, like we were allowed to go home, and that first night, I did not sleep. I scoured the internet on what does a baby who has died look like. What kind of questions, what kind of decisions, what like, what to expect next? It was almost like a crash course on educating myself on to what I was getting into.

Jaime 6:13

For sure. So, at some point you go back to the hospital and Ryann is born.

Erin 6:18

Correct.

Jaime 6:19

And when you're in the hospital, what are some of those decisions that you were asked to make on that first day?

Erin 6:27

So, after the first night of us at home and doing all of my googling searches, the next morning, the first thing I did was, I was constantly watching the clock because we were living in BC. My ex-husband's mom was killed in a car accident nine months before this. So, I knew exactly who I needed to talk to just to get help. We knew right away we wanted to bury Ryann with my mother-in-law, who was buried in Manitoba. So, as soon as there was business hours in Manitoba, the two-hour time difference, I called the funeral home and I asked to speak to a friend, Nathan, who is the funeral director. So, I called, and I had a conversation with Nathan: "listen, I don't even know how to start this conversation, but I have my baby that is due to be born, you know, around June 15th, is dead, and I don't know where to go from here. I haven't gone in to even give birth to her. I don't know what to expect. I don't know what we're supposed to do." So, to say I relied heavily on Nathan is putting it softly.

Jaime 7:47

So, you phoned him before...

Erin 7:49

I phoned him, before. Exactly. Yeah, we were supposed to call into the hospital when, when I was ready to go into the hospital. We, at this point, didn't know how Ryann died. They were worried about my health, if it was any kind of infection of some sort, if I was going to get the infection, that's what they were worried about. However, they were making sure that there was enough staff on board so I could have a one-on-one nurse the whole time. My doctor was

amazing at giving me time to try and sort it out through my head of what I wanted to do. He did give me the control of the situation, to a point.

Jaime 8:34

Right.

Erin 8:34

He definitely wanted to make sure that my health was first and foremost at this point. So, you know, there were a lot of decisions to make. We did call the hospital the next morning on the 11th to let them know in the afternoon that I was ready to come in, and they said, we don't have enough staff, you just have to wait. We got a phone call to come in shortly after supper time to be induced. You know, because Ryann had died and I wasn't going into active labor, they wanted me to be induced, but they wanted to make sure I had a one-on-one nurse. So, this was all new to me.

Jaime 9:12

Right.

Erin 9:13

So, we did get the phone call of what time we could come in. We had arrangements for my daughter, Gracie, to be cared for by a close family friend, and my mom and my ex-husband and I headed into the hospital to the great unknown.

Jaime 9:28

Yeah, can we go back to the hospital to talk a little bit more about other memorializing that happened there, in that first day or the first week after Ryann's birth. Because there are lots of different ways in which memories are made in the hospital that are offered. And what were, do you remember some of the things that were offered to you?

Erin 9:55

Absolutely, I had a nurse, Sherry, who was phenomenal. I was not phenomenal with her. I remember saying to her, "What did you do that was so bad that got you stuck with me?" And her answer was, "I chose to be here", and she was my one-on-one nurse. I didn't realize the scope of work and the scope of paperwork that they had to do at the hospital. I had asked her if she wanted to hang on to Ryann, and she stopped all work, and she came and she held on to her. We have pictures of Ryann with her that are in Ryann's baby book. She had asked me if I wanted to, you know, wash Ryann and dress Ryann, and I absolutely did not want to. And she had told me, then whatever decisions you make, like this one right now, "Remember the why of why you're not wanting to, because, later on, you may regret making this choice, but you have to remember the reasoning why you're not and that that it's okay." Do I wish now I could have given Ryann a bath? Absolutely. Do I wish now I could have dressed her? Absolutely. But the nurses who came in to bath her and dress her and tell me how beautiful she was and make her a person again, kind of brought me back from cutting off any kind of emotional attachment that I had to Ryann into, like, okay, she's still my baby. She may be dead, but she's still my baby. So,

without those nurses in the room who were bathing her and dressing her and telling me she was beautiful, that wouldn't have happened. They did handprints and footprints. They did ask if I wanted a lock of her hair, and I was like, "No." Like, at that time, I was like, "No, I don't need it, I want to keep her intact as much as possible." And it doesn't mean that my decision was right, doesn't mean my decision was wrong, or anybody who's chosen otherwise, it was my decision at the time.

Jaime 11:57

And I think your nurse's advice, remember the why, is so wise.

Erin 12:02

The why...

Jaime 12:03

So wise, so wise and important to remember that we make the decisions that we make for a reason at the time. I love that. Remember the why.

Erin 12:14

Remember the why. And at the time, so, I don't feel guilty about any of my decisions, and I don't judge people who made other decisions that I didn't make. Like everybody makes their decisions for themselves at the time. We did, my sister did call to get an organization who are photographers in the area, who sign up to come do photos of the baby. The one that we contacted was out of province, and they sent in somebody else. So, I did actually have a Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep photographer outside of my room who wasn't allowed in, and when another senior nurse came on duty that same day, she apologized profusely. She called her husband to bring in their camera, and she actually took photos of Ryann for me. So, she did go home that night, and she did send them all to myself and my ex-husband, and I've every single one of those photos printed off. And she even got photos of my ex-husband and I together with our daughter as well. So, I'm truly, truly thankful that all these years later, and even like months after Ryann died, that I had those photos from the senior nurse that came in.

Jaime 13:29

Yeah, can I go back to that conversation with Nathan?

Erin 13:32

Absolutely.

Jaime 13:33

So, you're still at home. You're talking with your friend who you had already just worked with nine months before, with your mother-in-law. And so, what was his response to your sharing with him where you were at and that Ryann was going to be stillborn.

Erin 13:51

Do I remember the conversation quote for quote anymore? Absolutely not. He was deeply affected. Our families knew each other, and my in-laws knew each other with his family for years. Growing up in small town, rural Manitoba, there's those silly little connections that go on. It was definitely not a conversation that I think that he was expecting to hear, nor was I expecting to have with him. I 100 percent have my trust in him completely and wholly still to this day. And the conversation was he was aware of there was going to be a funeral happening. And just to keep him up to date on what was happening and to contact him. He did reach out to a funeral home in Prince George to have them start taking care of the arrangements, or to be prepared to take care of the arrangements of Ryann and that we would be talking afterwards, 'cause I didn't know. I was like, "I'm honestly sitting at my kitchen table, I am pregnant, but my baby's dead, and I don't know where to go from here. All I know is that I have to go in and give birth, and what do I do next?" And he was like, "Okay, I have you." And he was on at that point. And I knew that I'd be talking to him from here on out, you know, for quite a while.

Jaime 15:22

So, he was able to help guide you through what needed to happen in order to get your baby from one province to three provinces over?

Erin 15:31

It was pretty much like once your baby is born, let me know. And I'm sure my mom did that. But then he walked me through the steps when I needed to know the steps.

Jaime 15:43

And so, there was a challenge with that. How was Ryann going to get from BC to Manitoba?

Erin 15:51

Correct.

Jaime 15:53

How did that decision come about?

Erin 15:54

Yes. So, after Ryann was born, we had found out that she had died because of the cord wrapped around her neck four times. We pretty much had to be in the perfect situation of being in the hospital, the proper doctors around everything, and maybe nobody knows what would have happened. So, complete cord accident. Nathan from the funeral home in Manitoba, had contacted a funeral home in Prince George for me. Shortly after Ryann was born, like yes, we did have some time with her in the hospital. She was either taken to a fridge or to the morgue. There were no CuddleCots™ in the hospital at that time. And when I was released from hospital the next day, if I wanted to come back and see Ryann because she was still at the hospital, I could, I just had to call ahead. One of the big things that I definitely remember at that point is wanting to know where she was at all times. So, I would honestly call the hospital just to see where she was. Is she in the fridge? Is she in the morgue? Can I come in and see her? Has

anybody come to pick her up? Anything like that. So, when I spoke to the funeral home in Prince George, I had asked them to let me know when they were going to go pick her up. When they picked her up, when she was at the funeral home. And I know that sounds bizarre to so many people, but even though my baby girl wasn't alive, I still wanted to know where she was. It was just that, that instinct parenting, you just want to know where your baby is, who has her, da-da-da. I did go in and speak to that funeral home. I knew I didn't want to cremate her, so she was embalmed in Prince George. And this is where Nathan really, really, really came in, and I, honestly, I don't know exactly the process of what he had to do. My options, when I spoke to him to get her home, was either putting her on a plane, and then that meant me having to ask my dad, or my then father-in-law, to go to the airport in Winnipeg and pick up their dead granddaughter, which I honestly would never ask either of them, because I don't know how that feels to them, and I honestly didn't want her out of my sight and me flying with her, I learned that she would still be in cargo. I didn't want that either. So, Nathan had told me my other option was to drive home to Manitoba with her, but he would need a little bit of time to get that all sorted out. So, I learned that Nathan had to get paperwork done up to transport a dead body between province to province to province to province, in case we were pulled over by the cops, that we were traveling with a dead human, really.

Jaime 19:06

Mhmm.

Erin 19:06

So, the day that I left out on the road was actually her due date of June 15. So, we had to make sure that Nathan provided the paperwork for BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba if we were pulled over. It was honestly beautiful weather in June, and we had that air conditioning cranked. Ryann's body was in her casket, and we put it underneath Gracie's feet and her car seat, so our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter had her sister, her dead sister, sitting in her casket, underneath her feet, the whole entire way back to Manitoba.

Jaime 19:38

And who else was in the car with you on that car ride?

Erin 19:41

Hmmm. So, Gracie, who was two and a half, my ex-husband, and my mom,

Jaime 19:47

What was that experience like? Packing your daughter's casket, putting it under your other daughter's feet, making that trek halfway across the country.

Erin 19:57

Yup.

Jaime 19:58

Tell us a bit about the car ride.

Erin 20:00

Oh, that car ride. Um, so as anybody who's lost a child probably knows that they don't sleep. So, I was wired. Um, just having given birth and still healing from delivery and trying to keep things as, I wouldn't say, positive, but just keeping Gracie happy was really hard for me. So, it was amazing that my ex-husband and my mom were there to banter off to her and keep her entertained and keep her with her mittens and her toque and everything on because we had that AC blasted just to keep Ryann's body cool in beautiful summer weather. I remember stopping at my brother and sister-in-law's house in Edmonton for the night, and the rest of the drive home from Edmonton to Manitoba was honestly a lot of deep conversations that I never - conversations you don't think you're ever going to have to have at the age of 26 years old of "What do things look like now? What is it going to look like when we get home? Who do we have to call for this?" We're still making the decisions on her funeral, and just really deep conversations with my mom. So, it was amazing to have that time. I think my mom saw myself in a different light. I saw my mom in a different light of just how she's there to support. You know, my ex-husband was still in his first year of grieving of his mom's tragic death, so I probably leaned on my mom more than I did my ex-husband, and I relied on them to raise Gracie, because I was not engaged in that at all. So, we did, we had some really good talks, and I felt like I was listened to and heard, you know, not once did my mom try and say something to make me feel better. So, I think there was a lot of growth in that car trip home, to be honest, Jaime.

Jaime 22:04

Sounds like there was a lot of support...

Erin 22:07

Mmmhmm

Jaime 22:07

...and that's what you needed at that time. So, you get into Manitoba, you get back to your hometown. What do you do at that point?

Erin 22:15

So, as soon as we got back to Manitoba, we left my daughter, Gracie, at my parents' house and we called Nathan, told him we were home. He was waiting for us the next town over for Ryann. So, we went straight there to get her to him. And I honestly don't know Jaime. I don't remember. I think I've blocked out that whole trip. I remember bringing her to him at the Neepawa Funeral Home. I knew she he was going to take care of her, and I just knew that I as soon as I dropped her off, I was comfortable, and I just needed to go home and try to sleep. I just wanted to hide out.

Jaime 22:59

Mhmm. I know that you had a funeral, a memorial for Ryann. And that took decision making as well.

Erin 23:08

Mhmm.

Jaime 23:08

Can you tell us about that?

Erin 23:10

It was a private family funeral. It just seemed wrong to have a full-on funeral for somebody who nobody had met, and I wanted it to be small and intimate. The family who I wanted to be there they were all invited. Close friends were invited. I needed to know that somebody could be there to look after our kids while we were at the funeral. Because I didn't want the little kids at the funeral, I wanted us to be able to just be present for Ryann and we all know, two-and-a-half-year-olds, you can't just it's about them, right? So, I did call up my good friend, Lori, and her husband Dale, came to my parents' house. When we went to the funeral, honestly, I didn't know what I wanted. All I knew was I wanted to hang on to my baby. So, this was the only funeral I've ever been at where we actually took her out of the casket, and everybody hung on to her. Everybody who came to see her and say bye to her. She was passed around. Pictures were taken. I remember when my grandma came to meet her. I left the building because I couldn't watch her. I don't know it almost seemed like I was a disappointment that I couldn't get her a live, great grandbaby, and I honestly didn't want to watch it, but I still remember my grandma walking up to see her and just holding on to her and smiling as if this baby was alive. So that was huge.

Jaime 24:44

That's amazing.

Erin 24:45

We had the little viewing at the funeral home, and then we went to go bury her. And we buried her on top of my mother-in-law. I didn't know what to say. So, my next big ask that I did with Nathan was and again, no different than Lori coming to watch all the kids so that we could be present at the funeral. I had asked him to say some kind of words at the graveside for Ryann, and he didn't balk at it. And now, years later, I'm like, holy crap, that was a lot to ask of him! And knowing that he had just buried my mother-in-law nine months before, he said some amazing words. Do I remember them, Jaime? No! But he said some phenomenal words there. I knew that I wanted all the older cousins that were there, like my cousins and my ex-husband's cousins, we all had colourful flowers, and so we put them on top of her casket, and then I just remember wanting to get the heck out of there. I was the first one to leave her graveside. I was the first one to get in a vehicle. I just wanted out. All I remember was wanting Gracie. I didn't want to be there any longer than I had to be.

Erin 26:05

I've spoken so much about him, and I'm delighted that my friend Nathan White is here with us today.

Nathan White 26:14

When a family first contacts us that they're going to be having a stillbirth, we just walk them through the process as much as we can, and we treat that stillborn baby no different than we would treat an 18-year-old in a car accident or 102-year-old that passes away in a care home. We still treat it as a life lived, and we want to memorialize that in the best way that the family would like, whether it's a cremation service, a traditional burial, some people choose a public service or a private service. We just give them all the options and just try to walk them through that journey.

26:48

And we understand how emotional it is, because they are expecting to bring home a car seat, not a casket. So, it's a very, very tough time for families, and we try to make it as comfortable as possible with all the options. When the stillbirth happens, we meet with them in the funeral home, no different than any other family, we have a consultation room, and we meet with them face-to-face, and just go over all the different options that they can have for their baby, and just make sure that they're aware that they can have a casket burial if they want. They can have a viewing of the baby. They're welcome to hold the baby in the funeral home, and then we can have them placed back in the casket for burial or cremation after that. Like we've had little, little babies that are only a pound and people still come in and see them and bury them in a casket as well.

27:38

Every hospital has different rules and regulations on what happens. So, in the bigger centres, a lot of times, the baby still needs to be placed in the morgue before all the paperwork is completed, and then we would attend afterwards. In the small town, like in Minnedosa, I've gone right into the delivery room. The parents are still there, and we take the baby into our care right from, from that room, basically. In bigger centres, we would...it's a little more of a procedure where the doctors have to complete the paperwork and we can't come right, right at the time of death, there's a little bit of a delay there. So yeah, we will just start the process right from when we get the phone call and help them with whatever we can. And as you know, every situation is unique. Sometimes they do need to go for an autopsy, depending on what has taken place with the pregnancy over the last little while. So, every situation is unique in that sense.

28:34

Being from a small town, people don't always stay here. They move across the country, across the world, but their family roots are here. So, a lot of times they'll want to come back here for a funeral or a burial. A lot of times we will help them transport their loved one back here. The family decided that they wanted to drive their baby from BC back to Minnedosa, which is completely legal. We had to do a lot of paperwork and just have everything lined up. But it is no different than if we would have drove out there and brought the baby back ourselves. So not everyone has that option, and not everyone's comfortable to do that as well. So, you just have to kind of let them know. It is obviously a big cost savings to families. If the baby would have been flown, it would have been a couple thousand dollars, whereas they were coming out

anyways, so they were quite happy to bring their baby with them. And the biggest reason why it's easy to do with a baby is because of the size to transport it from BC to Manitoba. If it was an adult, you need special vehicles, stretchers, things like that. Whereas in this case, we worked with the funeral home out in BC, who did all the preparation work for the family, and then they were able to receive their baby from that funeral home and bring it to us for the burial.

29:49

Funerals are expensive right now across the province, and it's, I don't want to say, an unwritten rule, but a lot of funeral homes choose not to charge families for stillborns or babies. We've had that in place since my grandfather started the company, and we've honoured that tradition of providing that service at no charge. If this were to happen and someone was in BC, they would have to pay for the transportation to bring the baby home. In this case, there was no charge. But as far as we're concerned, we just think that that's something we can do as a small town and a community for the families.

30:27

We try to support the family the best they can. Fortunately, I can say I'm not an expert, because we don't have to deal with this on a daily basis, luckily. It's maybe once every couple years that we do have a stillbirth. We just try to offer them as many services we can and just let them grieve in whatever way they need. People are quite grateful to have that opportunity. And, yeah, that's one of the things being in the small town, is when these families come in, nine times out of ten you know them, or it is your good friend, right? Like, Erin and Gerry and I knew each other well, so it was easier for her to reach out, not even on phoning the funeral home, phoning my personal cell and saying, "Hey, we've got this situation. Can you help me?" And it's, "Yeah, absolutely. Like, we'll do everything we can to help you out."

Jaime 31:20

Back to my conversation with Erin.

Jaime Ascher 31:24

And now you're—you yourself are back in Manitoba. You're near where Ryann is. How has that shaped how you interact with her, memorialize with her still, now?

Erin Bohn 31:39

I love being able to just go visit when I want to visit, which is something I couldn't have done before. Actually, the year that we moved home, her next birthday was actually her champagne birthday. So, my mom and dad, cousin, a good family friend, and Gracie, we went, and we had, well, Prosecco around her graveside and just we just chatted. And I loved, that was my first time ever being at her graveside on her birthday. It was on her 12th birthday. So, I love that. I just love knowing -- doesn't mean that I go and visit her all the time. I just love knowing that I'm so close to her. It's amazing being close to people who helped you in your darkest times, and truly being able to call them a friend and somebody who you just admire. As much as I wasn't emotionally ready to leave my friends and who I call my family in Prince George, and that's even the delivery nurse that I had with Ryann, the doctor that I had with Ryann, I can keep in contact

with them at any time. It's nice to be home, and it's nice to be around people who supported you.

Jaime 32:50

Absolutely. Erin, do you have final words to share with us about bringing Ryann home and what that experience, whether it's advice or just what that meant to you, being able to do what you did?

Erin 33:06

Hmm, I don't know if there's any advice. I literally grabbed on to who I trusted. Advice on bringing baby home? You know what, home is wherever you are, that's one thing I've learned. One time I used to call BC home. Manitoba is home now. Where I go to next, I don't know. The one thing I've learned in all of this is I now know what a bad day is. I haven't had a bad day since June 10 of 2010 when I found out that Ryann died. That truly was a bad day. People I thought were going to be there weren't there, or they were there, but then there were strangers who have become part of my story and part of Ryann's story, and even in the lowest lows of your life, keep looking for the helpers, Jaime. There's always somebody there to help. It's an old age thing. I know most people have all heard but there's always the helpers.

Erin 34:11

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

Jaime 34:15

This episode of Stillbirth Happens - let's talk podcast is brought to you by The Hummingbird Project of BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre. It is produced by Jasmine Coleman.

Erin 34:25

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 34:39

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 34:51

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 35:01

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