Black
MATERNAL HEALTH
Equity Action Alliance

Voices of Black Birthing in Hampton Roads, Virginia

A Maternal Monologue



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About the Black Maternal Health Action Alliance (BMHEAA)

The Black Maternal Health Action Alliance (BMHEAA) is a community-driven initiative dedicated to improving Black maternal health outcomes and advancing birth equity. Through collaboration, advocacy, and education, BMHEAA works to uplift community voices, address disparities, and promote systems of care that are safe, respectful, and equitable for Black birthing families. The Black Maternal Health Equity Action Alliance (BMHEAA) is an initiative of the Consortium for Infant and Child Health (CINCH), program of Eastern Virginia Medical School, Macon and Joan Brock Virginia Health Sciences at Old Dominion University. It is a community-based coalition devoted to eliminating black maternal care disparities by promoting equity through empowerment, advocacy, provider accountability, and system changes. BMHEAA has established several objectives, one of which is to heighten the voices and experiences of Black families to improve healthcare experiences by using the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health Community Care Initiative (AIM CCI) Maternal Monologues for Community Conversations and Action toolkit in Hampton Roads, Virginia.

What Are Maternal Monologues?

Maternal Monologues are first hand narratives that shed light on the experiences of Black birthing individuals, families, and supporters. These monologues reflect real journeys across the birthing journey including, pregnancy, birth, postpartum, and loss. Stories may be joyful, challenging, or anywhere in between, and are shared to uplift voices, build understanding, and contribute to efforts to reduce Black maternal mortality in Hampton Roads. Each story is developed with care and intention, allowing participants to share their experiences in ways that feel comfortable, supported, and authentic.

Maternal Monologues

What to Expect?

In the following pages, you will encounter a diverse collection of personal stories that depict a wide range of birthing experiences from individuals in Hampton Roads. Each story provides a unique perspective, some capturing moments of advocacy and support that highlight the strength and resilience of families, while others reveal the barriers and challenges that can arise during the birthing process. These narratives range from empowering experiences to those that may be more difficult and emotional. We encourage you to approach these stories with care, empathy, and an open heart. It is essential to respect the individuals and families who have chosen to share their journeys, as they offer valuable insights into the complexities of childbirth. By examining the challenges individuals and families face, we can identify systemic issues and advocate for improved healthcare practices and support systems.

Acknowledgment

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal stories with us. Your willingness to open up about your experiences shines a light on the challenges faced, and we cannot thank you enough for your courage. Your voices, your unique journeys, and the vulnerability you've displayed are incredibly powerful and resonate deeply within our community. These stories are not just anecdotes; they carry the weight of lived experiences that many may not fully understand. By sharing your truths, you are helping to foster awareness, promote understanding, and inspire change. Your contributions will play a vital role as we learn from these experiences, reflect on our practices, and, ultimately, work towards creating safer and more equitable birthing experiences for Black families everywhere.

Black MATERNAL HEALTH Equity Action Alliance



Confused and Left Alone Until Birth

Lisa, Hampton Roads

When I arrived at the hospital, I did not present with the typical 5-minute-a-part contractions. When I informed the staff that my contractions were about 30 minutes apart, the staff put me in a room and left; nobody checked on me. No follow-up questions were asked. No one came to see how dilated I was. No one seemed to care that I was in early labor. Instead of informing me about what was happening, I was left to wait alone until my contractions were closer together. I was still fully dressed when I had another contraction and felt the urge to deliver my baby. I told my husband that I was about to deliver our baby, and he needed to either get help or help me deliver our baby. My husband acted promptly and found a nurse to check on me, and she was shocked to see that I was 6cm dilated. Within minutes, I was brought into my delivery room, and before my next contraction, I was already 10 cm dilated. Everything was happening so fast, and I was advised not to push. I was given an epidural with hopes of slowing down labor so I could get antibiotics, which were needed before I gave birth. After a while, my doctor finally arrived. She said I was ready to push. My beautiful baby boy was born within 3 pushes.

Having already given birth already, I knew what to expect, but I can't help but think about first-time moms in similar situations. Imagine feeling confused about labor and being left without guidance. It's concerning that even after 15 years, many women in Hampton Roads still encounter these challenges.



When Listening Becomes Life-Saving

Tyrah, Hampton Roads

As a proud mother of two, my journey through motherhood has been both beautiful and challenging. While my first pregnancy was a smooth ride, my second pregnancy had many unexpected hurdles. From when I first arrived at the hospital, I felt prejudice due to my race. The staff was not only very dismissive, even though I clearly expressed my concerns, but the procedures felt rushed, often with little or no explanation.

After receiving an epidural, my delivery became quite complicated and overwhelming. When my son was born, I couldn't shake my worries about both my baby's health and my own. I was familiar with my body and knew what I should be feeling. However, whenever I voiced my concerns about something not feeling right, my pleas went unheard. I remember having a fever, but my symptoms were overlooked as potential COVID-19. I was shocked when a COVID-19 test was never given to me to confirm their suspicions, nor were any additional tests to explain my fever performed. I was left without clarity about any information.

Feeling unheard and scared, a shining moment emerged when I recognized a midwife whom I had met before. She noticed me in distress and stepped in to advocate for me. She listened to me and validated my concerns. She made sure that I was given the necessary medical interventions, including an emergency ultrasound. This crucial step revealed the reason behind my pain and worries. I had a piece of placenta tissue that wasn't fully removed, requiring the staff to intervene quickly. That moment of support was crucial, and I can't help but wonder if I would still be here to share my story without the midwife's presence.

From Fear to Safety



Kailah, Hampton Roads

My husband and I decided to expand our family and by April 2020, we learned we were expecting our first child. We were not expecting a worldwide shutdown and a series of unprecedented events that followed. I was already apprehensive about having a hospital birth, since I was aware at that time the black maternal mortality rate was 6x higher than that of white women. I heard many stories about black women feeling unheard and overlooked in the maternal healthcare system, from my own mother having her concerns dismissed during my birth in 1993 to celebrities like Beyoncé and Serena Williams facing similar issues despite their wealth, fame, and status.

When I first found out I was pregnant, I knew I wanted to explore all my birthing options. The best fit seemed to be an unmedicated birth assisted by a team of physicians and certified nurse midwives at a birth center attached to a hospital and within a month of my becoming pregnant, my local birthing center/hospital stopped delivering babies due to staffing shortages. We then began considering a homebirth and interviewing midwives. Our first choice was a Certified Nurse-Midwife with hospital privileges, but they were limited were all booked. We decided on a Certified Professional Midwife who, in the interview, told us she was committed to equity and autonomy for all birthing people. I later learned the opposite. She was reported to hold prejudiced views towards black clients. I was disheartened to find out she called herself a "white-racist" and referred to her black clients as difficult, ungrateful, and even transferred clients without support if they asked "too many questions". Realizing that discrimination and implicit bias against Black women can be present at all levels of birth work, I wanted a homebirth with a doula to avoid systematic racism in the hospital.

I was 42 weeks and 5 days pregnant and chose to transfer to the hospital since I had not gone into spontaneous labor. Despite everyone's best efforts, I had an emergency cesarean section and my doula helped me continuously revamp our birth plan while navigating barriers as they arose. Not only did she help me to process the mental, emotional, and physical challenges of pregnancy and impending motherhood, but she also assisted my husband in championing my birth preferences in a manner that was firm yet still in partnership with my care providers. I would not have been able to get through my pregnancy, labor, and delivery process without the support of my husband or our doula. At first, my journey had its share of unexpected challenges, but my doula truly became the anchor to my waves, turning my birthing experience into something truly wonderful and unforgettable!



This is About Birth Equity

Krystal, Hampton Roads

In 2023, I was a patient in a Labor and Delivery unit, admitted for a scheduled induction to finally meet my long-awaited miracle baby. What should have been a moment of joy and anticipation quickly became an experience that left me in pain, both physically and emotionally, which forced me to reflect on how Black birthing people are treated in medical spaces.

From the moment I was admitted, I followed the plan that was explained to me, and not long after settling into the room, I began to experience severe abdominal pain. I reported this pain to staff repeatedly, calmly, and clearly, as it continued to progress throughout the night. Instead of being taken seriously, my pain was minimized. I was told that I "should not be in pain." There was no clear explanation for what I was experiencing. No one explained what was happening in my body. My repeated reports of pain were acknowledged with nods or brief comments, but not with action, assessment, or compassion. At one point, I was given medication with no explanation of what it was for. I was not told what it was meant to treat, what was happening to my body, or why I was experiencing such intense pain. As the hours went on, the pain became unbearable. I cried out, moaned, and clutched my husband in agony, still without clarity or reassurance. No one prepared me for the possibility that I was already in labor.

There was so much happening around me, and through it all, I was intentionally monitoring my tone and choosing my words carefully. I made every effort to remain polite and composed because I did not want my attitude to become the reason someone mistreated me or to give anyone their "aha" moment to drop their professionalism. to give anyone their "aha" moment to drop their professionalism. Eventually, several staff members rushed into the room because my baby's heart rate had dropped during what they referred to as a "contraction." This was the first time I learned that I was in active labor. I was shocked and confused. I had been in labor for hours without being told, while repeatedly stating that I felt something was wrong.

This is About Birth Equity (continued)



Later, when pain relief was finally discussed, I was subjected to a painful and invasive cervical exam that felt unnecessarily forceful. I screamed and asked for it to stop, and in that moment, I felt powerless in my own body. My consent and comfort did not feel like priorities. As staff attempted to administer pain relief, I felt the uncontrollable urge to push. I was told to stop pushing, even though my body was doing what it was naturally meant to do. Thankfully, one staff member intervened, recognized what was happening, and advocated for me in that critical moment. I was crowning. Within minutes, I delivered my daughter.

After we were discharged, I experienced severe pain and complications that required a readmission for infection and postpartum preeclampsia. During follow-up care, I was asked repeatedly if anyone had forcefully inserted a hand or arm into me during labor, raising concerns about the trauma my body experienced during care. This experience forced me to confront a painful reality: Black birthing people are often not believed when we say we are in pain. Our concerns are minimized. Our bodies are handled without enough care, explanation, or respect.

I can't help but ask myself: Would my pain have been taken more seriously if I were not Black? Would my reports of discomfort have been believed sooner? Would my body have been handled with more gentleness and respect?

We deserve to be heard when we say something is wrong, to have our pain taken seriously, to receive clear explanations about what is happening to our bodies, and to be treated with dignity, gentleness, and respect during our most vulnerable moments. This should not be optional.

This is to call attention to a system that too often fails Black birthing families. No one should leave the experience of giving birth feeling unheard, dismissed, or traumatized. Birth should be centered on safety, respect, dignity, and humanity, especially for Black birthing people who already face disproportionate risks and poorer outcomes in maternal health. Training in trauma-informed care, anti-bias practices, patient advocacy, and respectful communication is essential. Shadowing, mentorship, and accountability should be standard. This is not just about one experience.

This is about birth equity.



My Doula Was Everything

Larmaya, Hampton Roads

In December 2023, I watched a documentary called Aftershock. The film highlighted healthcare bias, the need for policy changes around maternal mortality, and something I had never heard of before, doulas. Watching that documentary while pregnant hit me differently. I almost felt like God was sending me a message, and that's when I knew I wanted a doula.

I was about two months pregnant and living in Michigan, while my husband was on deployment. I had an incredible medical team. Their bedside manner was phenomenal—patient, clear, and incredibly down-to-earth. I felt confident and excited to deliver my baby with them. Then everything changed. I moved to Hampton Roads in January 2024, and when speaking with other new moms, a troubling pattern emerged—horrible birthing experiences, emergency C-sections, warnings about delivering at the military hospital, and constant advice about insurance plans. Searching for a doctor was extremely stressful, especially while being pregnant. I called seven or eight OB/GYN offices. Many didn't accept my insurance or weren't taking new patients.

Eventually, I found one facility, and the one I chose turned out to be a mistake. The front desk staff was great, but the doctors' bedside manner was terrible. They were cold, dismissive, and seemed irritated when I asked questions. Everything felt rushed and impersonal. After every appointment, my blood pressure was high from stress. I started dreading my visits. The situation escalated when I refused the gestational diabetes test at the OBGYN office, which one doctor even said they would remove me from care—I was seven and a half months pregnant. A staff member at the front desk heard my frustration and connected me with a nurse. I was transferred to the midwifery team, and my midwife listened to my concerns and advised that I didn't have to do the test; I could simply monitor my blood sugar at home. My intuition kicked in. I told myself: I need to find a doula—fast. I could sense that without someone advocating for me, this was going to be a combative journey. I researched nonstop and eventually found a doula.



My Doula Was Everything (continued)

June 30 arrived, and I went into labor. She stayed on the phone with me, coaching me and suggesting questions I should ask the nurses. Even though my husband couldn't be there, I had my mom and my doula by my side. My doula always responded with calm logic, education, and advocacy. Always honoring what I wanted for myself and my baby. The midwife approved of pain medication when I was 4cm dilated, and before I was given medication, I ended up vomiting and peeing myself, at least what I thought. My doula stepped in and wanted to check if my water broke, just to be sure, but nurses kept insisting that I just peed. After repeatedly asking to check, the nurse followed my doula's request, and sure enough, my water had broken. There was no time for medication. My doula looked at me calmly saying, "We don't have time for medication. It's time to push." She climbed onto the hospital bed and coached me through the pushing process. The way she guided my breathing and body felt like a natural epidural. She naturally shimmied my son out of me. Within moments, my son was born healthy.
I thought her job was finished, but she came back the n12ext day, and she helped me through my breastfeeding journey. Breastfeeding wasn't working and was incredibly painful and I couldn't see my midwife. I was forced to see the only doctor available, and unfortunately, the experience was terrible. The phrase "skin folk aren't always kinfolk" felt real. She was dismissive and said, "You just had a baby, what did you expect?" Right away, I called my doula, and she gave me a combination of remedies and within 4 days, I felt like a completely new person.

My doula was everything—therapist, insurance expert, advocate, healer, supporter, and sounding board. I truly believe that without my doula, my birthing experience would have been longer, more painful, and far more complicated.
She was the best investment I've ever made.



I Could Have Been Another Statistic

Miasha, Hampton Roads

As a mother of four, each pregnancy had taught me something new, but nothing prepared me for my most recent delivery in 2025. Toward the end of my pregnancy, I was placed on bed rest, which already made this experience feel different. My previous pregnancies taught me how to advocate for myself, so I felt prepared going into my planned C-section.
However, things quickly became overwhelming. I was given a spinal anesthesia followed by an epidural, but neither worked. I could still feel everything, even down to my toes. I repeatedly voiced my concerns, drawing on past experiences in which I learned not to stay silent when something didn't feel right.

As complications escalated, it became clear I needed an emergency C-section and was put under general anesthesia. My regular doctor did not perform them, so another physician stepped in. What I didn't realize at the time was how critical that transition would be. This doctor had taken the time to review my labs and medical history beforehand and decided to prepare two units of blood in advance as a "just in case".
During surgery, I began to bleed heavily—and those precautions became lifesaving.
Because the spinal anesthesia and epidural had not fully taken effect, and I had my c-section under general anesthesia, I woke up in excruciating pain. I felt every cut and movement. It was one of the most traumatic moments of my life. Thankfully, the staff responded immediately, administering a morphine drip to manage the pain and checking on me repeatedly, making sure I was comfortable.

Looking back, I am incredibly grateful for the doctor who paid attention and prepared ahead, and for the staff who listened to my concerns and went out of their way to make me feel comfortable. Without that level of care, the outcome could have been very different, and I could have easily been another statistic.

Someone Who Asked the Right Questions



Benita, Hampton Roads

Giving birth during COVID was a challenging experience. I was pregnant with my rainbow baby just six months after losing my firstborn. Yet, the experience felt like night turning into dusk. I should have been able to celebrate, but no one could be there in person. I was able to have a doula, a Black doula, but even she couldn't be there physically. Then, just three weeks before my due date, I contracted COVID from a child at my job. Despite everything, we made it through. I delivered our rainbow baby, but because I was still testing positive for COVID, I was told I could only have my baby close to me for feeding or changing, just hours after giving birth. In hindsight, a lot began in that “golden hour.” What should have been a time to connect with my baby turned into a time filled with anxiety, confusion, and fear—not just for me, but definitely for me. I understand the mixed feelings my presence may have created for the nurses and doctors. But sometimes, I wish I didn’t. I wish I could have remained in a bubble of ignorance and resentment because, despite their feelings, each little thing chipped away at the very few things I could hold onto. Until suddenly, I lost my grip and found myself tangled in—or maybe even strangled by—the clouds. These clouds surrounded me for 18 months. They were so translucent that you wouldn’t know they were there unless you asked about how I felt. Inside those clouds, my voice was muffled, my vision was blurred, and my feelings were numb. Among those heavy clouds, I lost sight of myself and how I was being stifled, tangled, and pulled away from enjoying my rainbow baby. And that is something I wish the staff had understood. I was a walking red flag for postpartum depression, yet they never took the time to notice. All they had to do was ask, to connect the dots. I hate this for myself and for my son; he missed out on the light within me, and I missed some of the joy in our moments together. Fortunately, I did have someone who saw me. My home visitor, asked the right questions and helped me untangle myself from those heavy clouds. It may have been by sheer coincidence that I was involved in home visiting, a service that I was only vaguely familiar with before, but I like to believe it was an absolute blessing. She listened and guided me to the help I needed; I'm no longer missing out on those special moments. Those little moments that can be so easy to miss.

No coincidence. Very necessary. It helped me untangle from those clouds. That's the reason my son, who is now 5 years old, is not just my twin, but he's also my light.



When it Matters the Most

Akilah, Hampton Roads

As a doula, my role is to support and uplift a client's voice, not replace it. But during one specific birth, I was forced to step beyond that boundary as I feared that the decisions staff would have made would have resulted in harm to my client and her child.
I was working with a Black family welcoming their third child when labor started. Once contractions were consistent and more intense we all met at the hospital. After being monitored for about 1.5 hours and dilating from 3cm to 4cm staff informed us that she wasn't in labor and there was "nothing they could do" since she wasn't yet 39 weeks. So they sent her home with a sleep aid pill in hand to rest and relax until labor progressed further along. I told the family to call me immediately with any changes and I would meet them back at the hospital. Not even 10 minutes later, I received a call from her husband that her water broke, and we all rushed back to the hospital. By the time she was readmitted, her labor had progressed rapidly and was 8 cm dilated.

I noticed she was disoriented and drowsy from the sleep aid she had taken. She then asked for pain relief, and the medical staff started preparing to give her IV pain medication. I was immediately concerned. Based on my experience, knowledge, and training, I was concerned about how the medication would affect her and the baby based on how quickly labor was advancing. Since she was disoriented, I explained my concerns to her husband, who declined the medication on her behalf. Staff dismissed him. Insisting that she asked for it. We were told only the patient could refuse, even though her state of mind had been altered. I feared for the baby's health at that moment, and I made the difficult decision to step in and voice my concerns to mom. Based on my concerns, she declined the pain medication and shortly after, she delivered a happy, beautiful baby.

I left that experience feeling unsettled. I felt the staff lacked knowledge of best practices and dismissed both the father's and my concerns about mom and baby. I wish they would have listened to our concerns instead of immediately shutting us down. This experience only reinforces how critical it is for us doulas to advocate for the best of both the mother and baby when it matters most.

Kennedy's Story

Heather, Hampton Roads



"Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, we regret to inform you… there is no heartbeat. Your daughter has died." Those words are etched into my memory forever. It was August 17, 2007.
I never imagined entering the hospital pregnant, and leaving with empty arms. In that instant, everything froze. My pregnancy with Kennedy was filled with love and dreams of how our family would grow. We prayed for this child. We couldn't wait for her first cry, to count her ten fingers and ten toes, and see if she would look more like me or her dad. I imagined him walking her down the aisle one day, and the two of us picking out her wedding dress together. I dreamed of so many things. But never, not once, did I imagine that my first hello would also be my final goodbye.

The room that should have been filled with celebration became a place of silence and heartbreak. And in those moments, the way I was cared for mattered more than anything.When I was in labor and delivery there were glimpses of compassion, nurses who saw me, who slowed down, who held Kennedy and helped me give her first and last bath. They made me feel like she was like every other baby on the Mother/Baby Unit, not the "dead baby". They made me feel like her life was special no matter how brief. In fact a few of the nurses attended Kennedy's funeral. I can't express how much that meant to me. But there were also moments that felt cold, rushed, and disconnected. For example, when it was time to be discharged, a nurse wheeled me out of the hospital next to a mom holding her newborn baby, while I was being wheeled down with empty arms. It was like a dagger being turned into my heart. Moments like that added to my pain in ways I didn't even have the words for at the time.

While in labor waiting for Kennedy to arrive. The room felt different. Quiet in a way that wasn't peaceful, it was heavy. It was scary. It was unfair. I remember looking around, trying to understand how a space meant for life could suddenly hold so much grief.
And in the middle of that pain, something happened that stayed with me in a way I could never shake. Along with losing Kennedy, I was battling preeclampsia and remained in the hospital for nearly a week after delivering her. During that time, my husband and my mom went out to find what we wanted to be the perfect burial gown. We wanted her to look like a princess.

Kennedy's Story (continued)



But when they were gone longer than expected, I called. That's when they told me, there was nothing. No dress small enough. No dress that felt worthy of her. Nothing that gave my daughter the dignity she deserved. There was nothing for a child so deeply loved.
That moment stayed with me long after I left the hospital. Because while I was trying to navigate my grief, I was also carrying this quiet heartbreak, that my daughter didn't have something as simple, yet as sacred, as a beautiful garment to be laid to rest in. Grief followed me home. It sat in her fully furnished nursery. It lived in the silence.
It filled every space where she should have been. And as the years passed, that feeling never left me.

On what would have been Kennedy's 7th birthday, I felt it stronger than ever.
Seven years without her. Seven years of loving her, missing her, carrying her in my heart instead of in my arms. I always knew I wanted to honor her legacy, but I never knew how or what. It needed to be special but it also needed to be something that could help others who would have to walk in our shoes. The night before her 7th birthday it came to me. I took the most meaningful thing I had, my wedding dress, and I cut it apart. Piece by piece, through tears, I created something I wish I had for Kennedy... an "Angel Gown". It was painful. It was healing. It was love.

When I shared it on Facebook, I thought I was just sharing a piece of my heart, but something incredible happened. Nurses from all over began reaching out. They asked for gowns for the families they cared for, families walking the same unimaginable journey. Families joining the club that nobody wants to be a part of. When Kennedy passed away and even now I never want her to be forgotten. I wanted her forever acknowledged, included, and remembered. Because she wasn't just a loss. She was my daughter. When Kennedy's Angel Gowns officially launched and became a non-profit, we started getting more and more requests for Angel Gowns. As we began delivering gowns, I started to notice something.

It felt like we were seeing more Black and Brown babies.

Kennedy's Story (continued)



At first, it was just a feeling, but I couldn't ignore it, so I started collecting data. Unfortunately, the data confirmed it. Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women in the United States. Black and Brown families experience higher rates of infant loss, preterm birth, and complications. That realization changed everything for me. Because suddenly, this wasn't just about my story. This was about a system. This was about inequities. This was about disparities in care.

This was about mothers like me, babies like Kennedy being failed, and I couldn't unsee it.
So I started researching. Learning. Listening. Advocating. That passion led me to create a doula program, one rooted in compassion, advocacy, and culturally responsive care, because I knew families deserved someone in the room who would see them, hear them, and fight for them. Someone who would say, your baby matters. That work, that passion that purpose, eventually led me to the White House, where I had the honor of sitting at a Black Maternal Health Crisis Roundtable with Vice President Kamala Harris. In that moment, I realized something, Kennedy's life, though brief, had reached places I never could have imagined.

But this work is far from over. I will never stop. I will continue to fight for mothers and babies like myself and Kennedy, especially Black and Brown mothers and babies, because they deserve to be seen. They deserve to be heard. They deserve to live. Kennedy never got the life I dreamed of for her, but her life created something beautiful. She gave me purpose in my pain. She gave me a voice. She created light in my darkest place. A true story of beauty for ashes, and she is still here. In every gown. In every family we serve. In everything I do.
She is my daughter.
She is my reason.
She is my forever.
I love you, Kennedy.



When Black Women Are Not Heard

Natasha, Hampton Roads

At 36 weeks pregnant, I knew something wasn't right. My feet were so swollen I couldn't wear shoes. I had constant headaches, and I was exhausted—but not normal pregnancy tired. Something felt, wrong, so I went to the doctor, and I was told, "It's normal. You're just at the end." I believed him, until I couldn't breathe right, until I could barely walk, until my body kept telling me—something is wrong. So I went back, and again, "You're fine. Just rest.", but I wasn't fine, and deep down—I knew it. I called my husband, who was deployed in Italy, and I said, "You need to come home." I didn't have proof, just an instinct, and thank God he listened.
Days later, I couldn't even take care of my babies. They were three and one, and I couldn't hold them. I couldn't function. On November 19th, everything changed, I couldn't make it upstairs, so I laid on the couch, trying to get comfortable, and I couldn't. Eventually, I fell asleep, and my husband walked in and helped me to the bathroom. I said, "Call 911… something is very, very wrong." I blacked out. I woke up on the floor screaming, not crying—screaming. The kind of pain that doesn't come in waves, it just stays. I had given birth twice before, so I knew labor, and this was not labor. The paramedics came, and I thought—finally, help. I told them I was in unbearable pain, and they looked at me, smiled, and said, "We know. You're in labor." They laughed, they talked and they didn't listen. I laid there, trapped in my body, begging to be heard.

I arrived at the hospital, and it didn't get better. I was in the hallway, still in pain, and they were smiling at me. I heard, "Congratulations," and I responded, "This isn't labor. Something is wrong," but they weren't listening. They were moving slowly and treating it like routine until I screamed, "My water broke!" They looked, and it wasn't water; it was blood. Suddenly, there was panic, voices everywhere. Someone finally said, "Mrs. Martin… your baby's heart has stopped," and in the middle of the worst pain of my life, I had to process that. I said, "I understand, but please, just get her out. Please help me." Then everything went black. My placenta had ripped away from my body. I said something was wrong, over and over again, but no one listened. My husband was told our baby was gone, and they told him they didn't know if I would make it either. In one moment, he lost his daughter and almost lost his wife.



When Black Women Are Not Heard (Continued)

When I woke up, I was in ICU. In and out of consciousness. Different faces and people talking over me, but not to me. My kidneys were failing, and still—no answers, until someone finally treated me like I mattered. A hematologist. She spoke softly. She explained what was happening to my body. She told me it was rare. She told me it wasn't my fault, and for the first time, I felt seen, but not everyone saw me that way. Some didn't look at me. Didn't ask me, they told me what they were going to do, instead of including me in my own care. When I said I was in pain I was told I wasn't, like my body didn't belong to me.

Days later, they brought me my daughter and I held her. Cold. Still. I remember thinking… How did we get here? How did I say something was wrong… and still end up here? After three and a half weeks I went home and I stayed silent until I read my records. "Belligerent." "Uncooperative." Because I was screaming. Because I was begging them to help me. Because I knew that my placenta was tearing away from my body. I was dying. My baby was dying. And I knew. So no, I was not belligerent. I was unheard. I was dismissed. I was a mother fighting for her life and for her child's life, and I carry that with me. The pain. The anger. The loss. But I also carry something else now. My voice. Because I did know, my body knew and I will never silence that again. I found a doctor who listens, who respects me, and who sees me. And because of that, I'm still here.

So this is not just a story about loss. This is a story about truth. About what happens when women— when Black women— are not heard. I'm not telling this to be pitied. I'm telling this because I survived it. Because my voice matters. Because we matter. And the next time a woman says, "Something is wrong…" Listen, because her life might depend on it

Thank You

With deep gratitude, we honor the voices that made this space meaningful.

Lisa	Miasha
Tyrah	Benita
Kailah	Akilah
Krystal	Heather
Larmaya	Natasha

Thank you for your courage, your truth, and your willingness to share your story.

Black MATERNAL HEALTH
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Every shared experience brings us closer to a safer birthing process

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