

ESSENTIALLY MIDIRS

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Views from the frontline

My life as a birth photographer

by Katie Hall

Big sister cuddles with her new brother after his newborn examination is complete.



Mum labours through a strong contraction in the birthing pool.

I was sitting in my office over the family room one morning when the text message from Kim came through... *"I'm feeling uncomfortable, but we're going out to breakfast. I'll be in touch."*

The next text came just 20 minutes later.

"I just had a contraction that knocked my socks off", she said. "You better come NOW!"

It's a good thing I was already on my way. My intuition was nagging at me. Something told me that it would be an intense morning. I had no idea just how intense and powerful it would be.



Mum and Dad embrace between very intense contractions.



Dad catches his son as the baby is born into the water and helps bring baby up to Mum's view.



Dad observes as Mum, as a midwife, checks her son's breathing and umbilical cord.

As I drove, sunshine broke through overstuffed clouds on the horizon. Kim and Kevin lived out in rural Wisconsin. It was a straight drive north up a country road. The car gathered momentum on the clear roadway and I sat back, centred myself, and let the adrenaline drain away. My mind got into a rhythm with the road noise and before I knew it I was pulling down the long gravel driveway and parking my car in front of their wood-sided farm house.

When I arrived, I found three older children and a German Shepherd dog waiting for me. As I entered the house I listened for the sounds of labour; within seconds I could hear low groans from the bedroom, typical of a labouring mother getting close to meeting her baby.

As I entered the bedroom I let Kim know I was there. We exchanged hello's and I offered what encouragement I could after a contraction passed. Kim said that things had gotten intense really quickly after leaving for breakfast, in fact, they hadn't even had time to eat in the restaurant as planned.

Watching Kim, I was awestruck to see this intensely intuitive woman, a midwife herself, turned labouring mother. Even when you've seen it all before, experienced it yourself and know what's coming next, you can't escape the turning point of transition in childbirth. It's an emotional wall that I see a lot of mothers hit. In my experience it is defined by the phrase, "I can't do this anymore".

But of course, they can. And they do more. Much more. To me, that phrase tells me that the baby is near.

Kim turned to me and uttered those exact words before she slipped into the birthing pool. I looked at my watch, baffled that she'd only been labouring for 45 minutes. I felt sure that baby would be here soon. Her husband Kevin entered the room with ice cubes and a soft, comforting demeanour. He sat outside the birthing pool opposite her, dabbing her brow and whispering things between contractions that made her smile and even laugh. Suddenly, she looked up and quite pointedly said, "Where is my midwife?"

Kim's midwife was enroute and I tried to reassure her that she was no more than ten minutes away. The look on Kim's face became intense. She told Kevin to get in the pool with her, and with the next contraction came that desire to push. Kim's instincts were kicking into high gear, and mixed with her precious midwifery skills, they allowed her to jump right past fear and push with intent. "Kim, are you pushing?" I asked. She responded through a loose jaw and a breathy exhale, "I hope so".

Mum and Dad admire their son shortly after birth, keeping him warm with a soft towel.





The placenta sitting in a bowl before the umbilical cord has been cut.

“After a few seconds Kim actually stood up in the pool to untangle her own umbilical cord, encouraged her little boy to take his first breaths, and then settled back down into the water with him to share a kiss with her profoundly proud husband”

The room brightened as the sun moved around a cloud, filling it with gorgeous light. It was then that I realised I was going to be the only witness to this birth. I was merely a fly on the wall. The spotlight was on them. Kim was going to do this herself, with her husband's help, without her midwife.

Kim carefully breathed through every contraction, while at the same time, exhaling instructions to her husband who now sat behind her in the birthing pool.

They talked together like this for two more contractions, Kevin simply confirming and repeating everything Kim said was happening. Carefully, and with amazement, he reached down to catch his baby boy beneath the water and fluidly brought him into Kim's view. She reached down and brought the fresh little life to the surface. Not one look of panic in either of their eyes, just sweet sighs of relief.

After a few seconds Kim actually stood up in the pool to untangle her own umbilical cord, encouraged her little boy to take his first breaths, and then settled back down into the water with him to share a kiss with her profoundly proud husband.

The transition between midwife and mother went on like this for six full minutes, through the delivery of the placenta, which Kim quickly placed in a bowl floating next to her. It was a swift movement, like she was just shuffling paperwork on her desk — all in a day's work, and then back to admiring the tiny features of her son's face and the smooth bits of baby hair on top of his tiny head.

Together, Kim and Kevin shared a moment of awe as they huddled over little Reid. The room was blissfully quiet and filled with that same beautiful light. The air was crisp with astonishment and disbelief. Kevin asked if it had really just happened, had they really just birthed their own baby?

“After seeing the whole hour and a half captured in detail, Kim was able to remark that I had been a silent witness to one of the most transformative events in her life”

Later, Kim told me that, *“as a midwife, I completely recognise how having people in the room can impact the experience for the birthing woman. As a mother, I am very much one of those private type of birthers. I like to find my space and get the job done.”* It was a privilege to be invited to share the experience with them.

After seeing the whole hour and a half captured in detail, Kim was able to remark that I had been a silent witness to one of the most transformative events in her life. The images caught more than the birth of their son. I had photographed her power, Kevin’s unending love and support for her, as well as the fearless connection they shared on this journey.

Happy birthday, little man.

My life as a birth
photographer



Katie Hall

Katie Hall

Katie works as a birth photographer in the Upper Midwest region of the United States. She has always been passionate about photography but began her career as a photographer in 2001 and has never regretted the decision. Find out more about her work at www.photosbykatiehall.com.