

Megan Lucy- Giving Birth During the COVID-19 pandemic- Personal Story for UK special collections

My name is Megan Lucy, and the first thing I need to ask is that you forgive the typos in this story. This personal history is being typed with my thumbs on a phone in fits and starts as I nurse and care for a new baby. I am submitting this story because I had the particularly unique experience of giving birth during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 14, 2020, at 3:10pm I gave birth to Cecilia Claire Lucy via ceaserian section at the UK Chandler Hospital.

I will back up to the weeks before Cecilia was born, though. I work as the faculty resources coordinator for the UK College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. Starting in February, we started hearing rumors about the COVID-19 virus, but I was not worried for myself. It seemed mostly contained overseas. However, my supervisor, Dr. Brian Lee, could see things more clearly and started thinking ahead to if we had to reduce operations or work from home. He started talking to me about working from home if I needed to. At this point, I was 9 months pregnant with Cecilia. She was measuring small on ultrasounds and so we were going once a week for ultrasounds and once a week for obgyn appointments. After one of these appointments, my husband and I saw the quarantine tent set up at the UK ER entrance. We thought they were running drills for possible cases, but later that day found out that the first case in Kentucky had been hospitalized at UK that day. Since I work in Ag North, the building next to the hospital ER, I started to get a little nervous and realize that the pandemic might actually affect my baby's birth.

On March 7, I started having contractions and went to the OB Triage at Chandler Hospital. We called our UK Medical student doula to join us. Unlike in the past, they wouldn't immediately let her join us in the triage room; we had to advocate hard and they finally let her in. We didn't tell our families that we were at the hospital because we were not sure if I was in labor yet, and we knew if they Googled the hospital name they would see that there were confirmed cases of COVID there and get overly worried about us. . I was at the hospital for several hours being monitored, but labor didn't progress, so they sent me home.

I continued having unproductive contractions through the weekend and decided I was to uncomfortable to return to work, plus I was now concerned about exposing myself to COVID on campus, being so close to the ER. My supervisor, Dr. Brian Lee, was very supportive and allowed me to work from home for the next few days. In fact, he welcomed it, because he was starting to see the writing on the wall that UK was going to have to ask a lot of employees to work from home if the pandemic progressed. These few days proved very beneficial for our office because I was able to figure out a lot of the challenges of telework ahead of time and others were able to apply those lessons when they eventually worked from home. On Wednesday, I had a regularly scheduled OB appointment, where we were going to plan for inducing me because of Cecilia's small size. We hoped that I could be induced on the 17th so Cecilia would be born on St. Patrick's Day, which is an important holiday in my husband's home town of Rolla, Missouri. While we were waiting for the obstetrician, I got the email announcing that classes were all going online and UK staff would be working from home. The nurse came in a few minutes later and took my blood pressure, which was high. I think it was elevated by the stress of the uncertainty of what the pandemic now meant at UK and for us. The nurse said she would come back in a few minutes and take my blood pressure again and that if it was still high I would have to go to triage and be induced right then. My doula rightly noted that telling someone they have to lower their blood pressure or give birth and then leave them in a room to wait for 15 minutes is no way to lower blood pressure. When the nurse came back, my blood pressure was higher and the nurse told me I had to go to triage right then

and have the baby. We didn't even see the OB again. We drove straight to triage. My husband later told me that this is when things started to feel surreal to him- the moment when it became clear I was not going back to work. While in OB triage, I watched the Arkansas Razorbacks baseball game. It was the last baseball game we would watch this season. We had originally looked forward to spending my maternity leave watching lots of college baseball and maybe even taking the baby to a few games. It was something I was very very excited about. After a few hours in triage my blood pressure was stable and there were no beds to admit me to for induction that night, so I was sent home again. At that point though, I was convinced that the stress of working from home during the evolving pandemic was elevating my blood pressure and putting me and my baby at risk, so I told my boss that I would be starting my leave early. The OB Triage doctor scheduled me for induction on the night of Friday, March 13, and I spent the next two days at home resting and preparing.

During this time at home, we watched ESPN and listened to the SEC chairmen talk about the cancellation of March Madness from an empty basketball arena. This was the moment that I knew the pandemic was a big, historic deal that we would never be the same after, and the first time I felt truly freaked out about it. Seeing the empty arenas reminded me too much of apocalyptic fiction.

At midnight on March 13, I was admitted to Chandler hospital to have labor induced. We were excited and did not anticipate any complications. I was given a dose of cervadil and settled in to sleep while it worked. Unfortunately, by morning, I still had not gone into labor, so I was given pitocin. When the pitocin caused Cecilia to have heart decelerations, I was told I would be having a c-section. The nurse brought a surgical gown and mask for my husband, but not for our doula. When I asked about if the doula could join us in the operating room, I was told no, because of the shortage of personal protective gear. This was the first I heard of a PPE shortage. At the same time, the nurse told my husband to hold on to the surgical mask he was given because it "was gold these days." We still have that mask, and my husband uses it when he has to go out.

Having a c-section was the scariest thing I have ever done, but that has more to do with being awake for surgery and meeting my baby than the pandemic. However, while I was on the operating table, the doctors and nurses were discussing the ppe situation because they were glad to discover that there were two gowns per package rather than one, so they realized they had twice as many gowns as they thought. Cecilia was born at 3:10pm while Bookends by Simon and Garfunkel played. The first thing she did was cry and pee on the doctor. Hearing her cry was the happiest I have ever felt. It was a wild fifteen minutes of emotion.

The next two days in the hospital were like an isolated little time bubble, something separate from the rest of time in some way. The days and nights blurred together as I was awakened every couple of hours to feed my baby or have medical staff check on us. We were aware that outside Kentucky was starting to shut down from the pandemic, but we were completely enveloped in our care for our daughter. Despite everything, I felt very safe, happy and cared for in the hospital. At this point the hospital was working on full staff it seemed, and the staff who cared for me were not wearing masks. We were aware of the virus risk to some level and particularly made sure to profusely thank the cleaning crews who disinfected our room. I wasn't scared or worried until the OBGYN who performed my c-section came in on Sunday morning and said "We need to try to discharge you tomorrow, the hospital is a creepy place to be right now." This was a real "oh shit" moment for me, because it was such a serious decision to send a new mother home a day early after a c-section. It freaked me out to realize that the doctor

thought it was more dangerous for us to stay at the hospital than to go home early. Ultimately, I went home mid-day on Monday, March 16.

When it was time to take Cecilia home, we got out the newborn outfit we had picked for her only to find it was much too large! I had been told she was a small baby, but in the hospital, she had just worn a diaper and blanket, and I hadn't seen her next to any other babies to compare, so it wasn't until this moment that I realized that despite being full term, she was the size of a preemie baby. It scared me to have such a tiny fragile life to take out into the bug scary world. On a practical level, it also meant we only had two outfits that could fit her. I called my mom who was on the way from Missouri and she ordered some preemie clothes from Amazon, but they wouldn't arrive for a few days. I was very glad for the preemie outfit my sister had given us just in case, so for a while Cecilia only wore a pink rainbow and unicorn footie pajama suit.

That first 24 hours at home were just me, my husband, and baby. We hadn't planned on visitors while I was at the hospital, because even before COVID-19, the hospital had strict visitor limits because of the seasonal flu. At this point, on May 16, 2020, there were confirmed COVID cases in Lexington, but not yet in Missouri where my parents were, or Tennessee, where my in-laws were. We were not worried about catching the virus from guests yet. Our main concern was that after visiting, my Dad, who is a healthcare administrator in Missouri would have to self isolate at home for 14 days before returning to his office. My younger sister is an ambulance dispatcher in Missouri, and was told that if she travelled to Kentucky, she would have to take 14 days of leave, her entire allotment, to self isolate when she returned home. We decided that my sister's visit would have to wait, which was heartbreaking to both me and my sister.

My parents stayed with us through Friday, March 20. I was thankful for their help as I recovered from surgery and got used to baby care. The thing I will never know about this time period is how much of my anxiety was linked to giving birth and being a new mom and how much was pandemic linked. The first few nights I didn't sleep much at all. I stayed awake and watched my baby to make sure she was breathing ok. I had the fear of SIDs ingrained in me so hard from the medical community that I didn't want to take my eyes off of her for a minute. By the third day, I was beyond my limit of sleep deprivation and had to surrender to handing Cecilia over to my parents and husband in shifts so I could sleep. About this day is when I broke down crying for really the first time since my surgery. There were two times I cried really hard. The first was triggered by the lyrics "for one so small, you seem so strong" in the song, "You'll be in my heart" which was on a custom playlist my husband made for Cecilia. It hit me hard because of Cecilia's tiny size. Her smallness scared me so much. Even now at two months old she is still only 9lbs, the size of some newborns. The second time I cried was after reading a news report about baseball being cancelled. This one hit me hard because I remembered seeing Avengers End-game and saying it was unrealistic that baseball would stop if half of the world's population disappeared, rationalizing it because baseball kept going during WWII and when the population was much lower than it is now. Seeing sports stop in contradiction to what I thought would happen made me feel like we were living at the end of the world. It is hard to separate this pandemic related anxiety from new mom anxiety, because it came after three days of sleep deprivation and right at the time that I was expected to have the "baby blues" hormone drop. This entanglement actually at times increases my anxiety about being Cecilia's mom. Because her birth is so tangled up with the pandemic, in my most anxious moments I have an irrational fear that the end of quarantine will somehow be the end of my time with her, like she is my quarantine baby and once the pandemic passes, she will be gone too.

As the first week of Cecilia's life progressed, the pandemic started to have a greater effect on our lives. We were actually relatively well prepared for lockdown because we had already been planning on isolating at home for at least six weeks because of Cecilia's newborn immune system. We had a good supply of cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, and meal kits lined up. However, we quickly ran through the supply of newborn diapers we needed and we still needed preemie size clothes. All of the children's clothing stores were closed now and we didn't want anyone spending a lot of time looking for clothes at multiple locations. Eventually, I was able to place a pickup order for clothes at Target and my mom went to get it. She reported Target being dark and quiet and eerie, which freaked me out a bit. It reminded me of the show Last Man on Earth, which my husband thought was funny, but which always gave me nightmares. That show is something I have been reminded of a lot recently because it involves two moms giving birth during a virus induced apocalypse. I kind of wish now I had never seen it.

After clothes, the next problem we encountered was diapers. The diaper situation really irritated me. In the first weeks of the lockdown, you had to go into the stores and buy diapers in person. That made me mad because it seemed like the fact that you needed newborn size diapers should be enough to indicate that a member of your household was in a high risk group, being a newborn and all. I don't think the stores should have banned diapers from delivery and pickup, but they did. So, on Thursday night we got to the point where someone had to go get diapers. I hated this so much. The conversations that transpired felt like something out of the Walking Dead. It ultimately came down to either my dad or husband would go. I felt like I was having to choose which of them to sacrifice for the good of my baby. It really sucked. My dad ended up going, mostly because he was more insistent than my husband.

By Thursday, the balance of cases between states had changed a lot. Now Tennessee and Missouri both had more cases than Kentucky, and those states were starting to shut down too. We talked to my husband's sister who was keeping an eye on their parents and were very concerned to learn that Nathaniel's parents had still been going out in public and attending church recently. We made the really hard decision that we couldn't let them visit yet. It was the worst and hardest decision I have ever had to make. It broke my husband's heart and my in-laws hearts. Then, to be fair, I had to tell my parents to leave, too. It was horrible, it still is horrible. We all cried a lot. Cecilia is two months old now and hasn't met her grandparents or aunts or cousins. We don't know when she will be able to see her maternal grandparents again. This is the worst part of the whole situation. Lots of things that are on pause right now can be resumed close to where they left off when things get better. Baseball games played a year from now will be pretty much the same as the ones we are missing today. But you can't pause a baby from growing and developing. My inlaws and sister will never hold Cecilia as a newborn. Cecilia has three great grandmothers who will probably never know her as a baby, since she will likely be a toddler by the time she can see them. I am bawling as I write this. It makes me feel evil. Like I am keeping something precious and irreplaceable away from the people I love the most, but I don't feel like I have any other choice in order to protect everyone I love, including my tiny baby.

We video chat with friends and family frequently. We celebrated my grandmother's 89th and my nephew's 7th birthdays via facebook messenger. We have three friends who also have newborns that we have texted a lot and that helps us feel more normal, like we aren't experiencing something completely unique and alone. Video chat has become a way of life for us. My last two OBGYN appointments after giving birth were done over the phone. That was another key sign of how bad things are. The OBGYN thought that the risk of contracting COVID outweighed the risk of my surgical suture being infected. We do still have to take Cecilia in to the doctor for checkups and vaccines though. There are scary things for

babies than COVID. We don't want her to be same from COVID only to get the measles or something worse.

Lots still remains uncertain though. I don't know when I will have to start working on campus again, or when we will be able to see family in person. I don't know what will happen if Nathaniel or I get sick, and it scares me to death. I know if I get sick, I could be separated from my baby and I hate that idea so much. When my parents were getting ready to leave Kentucky, my Dad told me that we were safe in our happy little cocoon at home, but as the states reopen their economies, I feel my cocoon crumbling and my power to keep my family safe waning. I know that part of being a parent is learning to accept that you can't protect your child from everything bad in the world, but for these last two months it has been nice to feel like the whole world was working together to stay safe and that kept my little girl safe.