

Melyssa's Story

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Editor's Note

This is a fictionalized account of a potential future scenario, created to dramatize the need for the Bethesda Referral & Teaching Hospital. It is a companion to "Addressing the Child and Maternal Mortality Crisis in Haiti through a Central Referral Hospital Providing Countrywide Care," page 59, and "Integrated Strategies to Address Maternal and Child Health and Survival in Low-Income Settings: Implications for Haiti," page 94.

My name is Melyssa, and this is my story.

It had been a long day. As I walked up the hill I had walked a million times going home from my mother's house, I couldn't help but notice that I was much more tired than usual. I'm even having a little trouble breathing, probably because of my condition.

Oh yes, my condition. How could I forget that, especially since it was the reason my day started so poorly with the terrible argument with Jean Paul. After five years of marriage you would think we would know how to listen to each other, that he would try to understand how I'm feeling. He seemed to just want to blame me. I had to get away.

I'm pregnant. I'm scared. I've been pregnant twice before and both of my babies died. They died right off—I didn't even get to hold them. Then Jean Paul couldn't stop the bleeding. We were so alone; we were both so frightened. I don't want to go through that again. I don't think I *can* go through that again.

And here I am—pregnant again.

This morning my mother tried to encourage me. "The third time should be better; you shouldn't worry," she said. Well, I didn't feel very encouraged. It would be so great if we could have a

healthy baby—a baby we could both love and raise together. Just a dream.

I have no reason to believe it will be any different this time—we are in the same situation as before: we have no money to buy food or medication for me, and we certainly don't have money to pay for a nurse to help us during delivery. I know there is a midwife in a village just 10 kilometers away. Everyone tells me how she could make a difference for my baby and me. But she needs to be paid. This was all my mother could talk about this morning, but she might have just as well been talking about a fairytale—there is no way we'll have anyone help us. It will be just Jean Paul and me again. I guess that was why he was so upset this morning—he is probably just as scared as I am.

When I finally got to our house, before going in I paused to catch my breath—the walk home certainly was a struggle. While standing outside I heard someone talking with Jean Paul. Although initially I didn't recognize the voice, as I entered I knew right off it was the voice of Pastor Michel. I always felt his presence to be so comforting—but the shape my mind and heart are in now—I wasn't sure I was glad to see him.

He stood up as I entered and came towards me—"Oh Melyssa, I'm so

sorry for you." I wasn't sure if he was talking about my fight with Jean Paul or my pregnancy. So I said the only thing I could think of saying, "Thanks."

"Melyssa," Jean Paul started, "Pastor has some news I think you will find very interesting. I felt so terrible after our discussion this morning that I went to speak with him after you left."

I had mixed feelings. On one hand I was so relieved that Jean Paul and I would be facing this ordeal together. On the other hand, I was more than a little curious as to how much detail he gave the Pastor about the morning's "discussion" as he called it.

As the three of us sat down around the table, the pastor was the first to speak. "Melyssa, I have good news for you. Although I don't know all the details, the leaders in the village have started having meetings and are planning things we can do if we all work together. For the first time, I believe pregnant mothers can have hope."

After being in an almost continuous state of despair since I found I was pregnant, the word "hope" seemed like something far away—something out of my reach. No—I haven't had hope for a very long time.

"Marie, who you may know from our village," the pastor continued, "has been hired by a new hospital outside of Port-au-Prince to organize these meetings. What I find very interesting is all the people Marie has gotten involved: the pastors, the nurses and the midwife, the government people, and importantly, the many churches and organizations from North America who come to our village regularly. Do you understand how important all this is?"

It all sounded very confusing to me, and I was still thinking about what it must feel like to have hope. But since I was asked a question, all I could do was nod my head. It occurred to me later that a nod of my head was kind of a weak reply.

"What does all this mean to my baby?"

Jean Paul jumped into the discussion. "Pastor, tell Melyssa what you told me earlier." Jean Paul sounded like he wanted to make sure that what he had heard earlier he heard correctly. "I think she needs to hear it."

"Melyssa," replied the pastor, "the first thing they plan to do is to identify all the pregnant women in the village and then organize the nurses and midwives so that they will always be available to assist when it comes time for the babies to be born. They want to make certain that women and their husbands will never again have to have babies at home alone."

I cried.

Jean Paul and I hugged. He was crying too! He was the first to talk. "What is our next step, Pastor?"

"I'll take you both to meet with Marie in the morning. She will know what to do."

It was a night of very little sleep—mostly out of excitement. For the first time in my life I prayed—well, I actually talked with God if that is what prayer is. Why didn't I pray when I had so much fear? I guess I felt alone.

In the morning Pastor Michel took us to meet with Marie at a little clinic in the village. I had never been there before; as a matter of fact, I had never been to any clinic. The Pastor left, and Jean Paul and I sat down, having no idea what to expect.

Marie asked me about my health and my pregnancies. I told her how I was feeling now, and then I told her about the two terrible experiences I had with my first two pregnancies.

She listened to everything I had to say. When I finished her first words were: "Melyssa, I'm so sorry this happened to you. I can't imagine the fear

you both must be having with this third pregnancy. In this village and surrounding area, unfortunately the majority of women are alone when they are having their babies and many experience tragedies just as you did. It is a major problem. We want to help.

"We will run tests this morning to check on your health and the baby's health, and then I will meet with you and Jean Paul this afternoon to give you the reports."

Now this you won't believe. The nurse put a metal stick on my stomach and we all could see my baby on the glass of Marie's computer. My baby! Jean Paul was grinning ear to ear.

Oh, in case I didn't mention it—our baby is a girl!

A nurse then took some of my blood—another first for me—gave me a shot, and then gave me some special vitamins to help my baby. Another new experience: someone caring for me.

That afternoon we sat down with Marie to hear the results of the tests. "First of all, the people down at Bethesda Hospital have reviewed the ultrasound that we did this morning, and they estimate your baby to be 28 weeks old. Although she is little, she looks healthy."

How could anyone that far away see my baby on Marie's computer? I could tell Jean Paul was also perplexed. But neither of us wanted to interrupt Marie.

Marie continued, "We do need to give you some pills since your blood pressure is high, and then we will follow your blood pressure and kidney tests closely. Other than that, you and your baby should do well."

Hope. I have hope. Thank you God for helping us!

After we left the clinic we went to Pastor Michel's home where we all celebrated the incredible happenings of the day. Then Pastor Michel prayed a prayer of thanksgiving and also prayed how he knew God has always had a purpose for Jean Paul, and me, and my baby.

Well, two months later, Marie sent me down to the new hospital—to Bethesda—because of my blood pressure and kidney issues. At first when she said I would be going, both Jean Paul and I must have appeared a little uneasy because she quickly added, "A Bethesda Hospital van will be picking you both up tomorrow morning to take you and others on the four-hour trip." How amazing is that!

Jean Paul looked at me and asked, "Who are these Bethesda people?" He didn't expect an answer but I replied anyway, "I guess we'll find out."

In all my 25 years I have never left the area around my village, although I was a little nervous, I was excited. When we arrived at the Bethesda Hospital and when we stepped out of the van, I couldn't help but notice, in large print above the front door, the words *Hope and Health for Haiti*.

Well, the rest is history. My baby was born seven days later, and she sure was tiny. What she lacked in size she sure made up for in noise. Yes, my little Hope is healthy.

The entire experience at Bethesda was like a dream. A wonderful group of doctors and nurses—a combination of North Americans and Haitians—all took great care of Hope and me.

I have to finish my story here because I have to catch a Bethesda van to go back to the hospital this morning. No, it is not because we are sick. I thank the good Lord that Hope and I are in good health. You see, I am training at the hospital so I can become a midwife in my village. I want to do everything I can to make sure no woman—or her husband—ever have to experience childbirth alone. I want them to have hope.

My name is Melyssa, and this is my story.

Rural Haiti

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