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‘WE’RE NOT ALONE IN THIS’

Amid pandemic, nurse helps grieving families cherish memories in Iowa maternity ward

McKenzie Harreld knew the moment she most feared would come. But she didn’t know how deeply the actions of a kind nurse would reverberate in her life.

Courtney Crowder, Des Moines Register

Calvin Blake Harreld’s short staccato wails — more alarm clock than classic baby cry — bounce off the walls, echoing through the delivery room.

They were earsplitting evidence that the steroids meant to ensure he’d be strong enough to make his earthly debut at 37 weeks had worked, and worked well, mom McKenzie Harreld says.

Nurse Kelsey Shortley places the newborn on McKenzie’s chest, and little Calvin promptly pees all over himself and his mother. She and dad, Clayton, laugh. Their baby is OK, all systems working.

If these young parents’ adoration had a sound, its noise would rival Calvin’s caterwauling, reverberating well beyond their suite’s walls.

“It was a love I’ve never felt before, and it was that overwhelming joy that we’d been praying



Clayton and McKenzie Harreld hold their four-month-old son, Calvin, at their home in Slater on Feb. 17.

for,” McKenzie says. “I just wanted that *happiness*.”

Ten short minutes later, her contractions start anew. The doctor looks at McKenzie: *Ready to push again?*

She nods her head yes.

She knew this moment would come, the tragic foil to her new joy. She knew she couldn’t put it off any further.

Planners all their lives, the Harrelds like to have a blueprint, to know exactly how everything is going

ABOUT THE SERIES

Over the past few months, Mary Greeley Medical Center opened its doors to the Des Moines Register, allowing us to tell stories of dedication, sacrifice, exhaustion, loss, pain and joy from inside the hospital. This is the sixth of an occasional series.

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to happen, in what order, and to sort out all their emotions beforehand. For weeks, they worked through the logistics of this scene, checked their feelings and tried to gauge their reactions.

But then came the silence.

At home, Cherish Shuka's phone rings. A nurse at Mary Greeley Medical Center and a photographer, she's off work, but anticipated this call. She had offered to take snapshots of the family of four in the few fleeting hours they'd number as such.

She grabs her camera and sets off into the night.

The coronavirus pandemic has interrupted an untold number of plans, forcing even the most ardent of life architects to face an uncertain future and reckon with a variable reality. In hospitals across America, emergency plans become best laid plans when surges hit. Doctors create procedures but break them when the difference is life and death. A new need arises; someone steps up.

And a couple of young parents in a maternity ward have decided they want to remember what they knew would come but couldn't really prepare for, and a nurse decides to help them.

Click. Click. Click.

The shutter of Cherish's camera is just audible over the room's din. Each click captures the crossroads that would empower and bond two women, one in front of the lens and one behind it.

While most of us are just starting to weigh how we've been changed by the past year and consider how to make sense



Clayton and McKenzie Harreld hold their four-month-old son, Calvin, at their home in Slater on Feb. 17.



Birthways nurse Cherish Shuka had never been in the room for a stillborn delivery, but agreed when asked to offer grieving families stillbirth photography.

of such loss, McKenzie and Cherish know what they've been called to do — to break the silence.

WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED — BOTH TIMES

A mix of elation and adrenaline flowed through McKenzie's veins as she

drove to her first OB appointment. Twelve weeks along, the ripple effects of COVID-19 closures had pushed her initial eight-week meeting back a month.

She and Clayton, both 26, always wanted children, at least two, but probably three, she says. For her whole life, McK-

enzie had seen herself as a mom, imagining cheering at her kids' games and tournaments just like her parents had.

Both from farm families in small central Iowa towns, both athletic, McKenzie and Clayton met as freshman members of the Briar Cliff University basketball teams and

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McKenzie Harreld shows off her baby bump on July 18, when she was about 22 weeks along. | The box McKenzie and Clayton Harreld used to reveal their pregnancy to her family, who are all big doughnut fans.

“It was a love I’ve never felt before, and it was that overwhelming joy that we’d been praying for. I just wanted that happiness.”

McKenzie Harreld

quickly paired off, each one falling in love with the other’s kindness. They got engaged on Easter in 2016, made their home in Slater about a year later and tied the knot on a summer afternoon.

After trying for a couple of months, two lines appeared on McKenzie’s pregnancy test in March — just as a new virus began seeping into Iowa.

The technician found the baby’s heartbeat easily, and McKenzie breathed a sigh of relief. That fast,

almost mechanical pumping was proof they *really were pregnant*, that her imagined life was coming closer to reality.

COVID-19 wasn’t a huge concern, her doctors said. The disease was new, but there wasn’t compelling evidence that the virus would affect her pregnancy. Do what everyone else is doing, they said. Mask up. Wash your hands.

About two months later, McKenzie lay on an exam table, Clayton sitting by her side, as a sonographer wielded the wand for their first ultrasound. Rorschach-esque blobs moved across the screen. The couple watched dutifully, unsure of what they were seeing.

The technician seems surprised.



McKenzie Harreld holds a sonogram of her twins in their nursery.

“This is your first ultrasound, isn’t it?” she asks. Uh-huh, they say.

“Well, you’re having twins.”

Masks covered half

their faces, but the couple’s eyes were as big and bright as flash bulbs. Considering McKenzie wasn’t gaining extra weight and technicians always found

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a heartbeat quickly, no one ever thought to look around for a second, doctors told them.

They were going to have a boy and a girl — the American dream.

By then, nearly halfway through the pregnancy, the Harrellds had prepared for their life as parents, planned a nursery and started buying essentials.

News of twins felt like starting over, McKenzie says. Now, they needed a new plan: two cribs, two chairs, two mobiles. This new reality took awhile to sink in, but soon McKenzie and Clayton “could visualize the two of them running around together,” she says.

The babies lay head to feet, like a fetal yin and yang. Her feet were low on McKenzie’s stomach and his feet were high, so they could always tell who was kicking when.

At night, Clayton read the twins “Time for Bed,” a picture book McKenzie memorized as a child long before she ever learned to read. On weekends, they redesigned their nursery: two cribs, two chairs, two mobiles.

A routine formed.

In early September, they went to a family gathering, seeing a relative who later tested positive. They took tests to be safe and got their results simultaneously.

Him, negative. Her, positive.

She thought back to what the doctors said: *No compelling evidence*. At first, she didn’t have symptoms, but then a fever struck and she lost her sense of smell. She was already pretty tired, but the virus knocked her out,



Birthways nurse Cherish Shuka prepares to give a newborn a bath at Mary Greeley Medical Center on Feb. 17.



McKenzie Harreld looks at her daughter Blakely’s footprint, which she keeps with other mementos in a handcrafted box her dad made.

she says.

“I was really dehydrated, and I didn’t have an appetite, but I knew I needed to stay healthy, so I’d wake myself up and eat and wake myself up and drink fluids,” she says.

She called her doctors, but they held steady.

“It was just everything changed, in the worst way imaginable.”

Clayton Harreld

There was no reason to worry unless she started cramping or bleeding.

So the couple kept reading, kept counting kicks. And the twins seemed copacetic as McKenzie regained her strength.

They went in for another appointment at 32 weeks, just over a month from when they’d give birth. The technician measured the baby boy and listened to his heart. All good.

Then, the girl. The sonographer furrowed her brow, moving the ultra-

sound wand around and around. She turned off the monitor and turned toward the couple.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “There’s no heartbeat.”

No heartbeat. Two words, one breath, and the

Harrellds’ reimagined life collapsed.

“You can’t put into words when you get the news that you’re pregnant, just all the excitement you feel. But it’s double, triple that when you get the news the other way,” Clayton says.

“It was just everything changed, in the worst way imaginable.”

But then the second shoe: The babies were far enough along that both of them — Calvin and his sister, Blakely — would need to be delivered.

AT THE BEDSIDE, THROUGH A VIEW-FINDER

Cherish always understood that her work as a labor and delivery nurse would come with heartbreak. Even in the hospital’s most joyous unit, she knew not every story would have a happy ending.

An extrovert and an empath, she’s naturally bubbly, with a spirit so vibrant and energetic it’s contagious. But speculating how she would feel about a fetal death, planning how she would comfort those patients, was “terrifying,” she says.

A Level Two hospital, Mary Greeley doesn’t see many high-risk births. A nurse for nearly two years, Cherish had been on shift when a stillborn was delivered, but not in the room. Waiting and wondering when she was going to be at a patient’s bedside for a complication was like constantly fearing a bogeyman around the next corner.

“If I can’t wrap my head around it,” she says, “how am I supposed to be



McKenzie Harreld looks at photos taken by nurse Cherish Shuka of herself, her husband, Clayton, and their newborn twins, Calvin and Blakely, who was stillborn.

“It’s that reminder that, oh, yeah, it’s not just a happy time. It’s a sad time, too.”

McKenzie Harreld

there for the patient?”

Cherish, 23, wanted to be a nurse as far back as she can remember, a choice spurred by a long line of medical workers in her family. But growing up in Hawaii, majestic landscapes and skies often painted in technicolor also helped nurture a passion for photography.

At Northwestern College in Orange City, she shot roommate photos for girls in her dorm. Those soon led to engagement shoots, which led naturally to wedding photography.

Before COVID-19, she saw her day job and her side gig as separate — one a vocation and the other an avocation.

But when the pandem-



Clayton Harreld says Cherish Shuka did a really good job capturing the good memories of their twins' birth and what the Harrelds want to remember about their daughter, Blakely.

ic hit and the hospital stopped allowing most outside visitors, Mary Greeley canceled its newborn photography service — not a big deal for parents who leave the hospital with their baby.

Knowing Cherish’s work behind the camera, a few pregnant co-workers asked her to take photos of their deliveries. Sure, she said, dutifully toting her gear to work.

After a few of those shoots, the unit’s bereavement nurse asked Cherish what she thought about photographing stillborn babies. Those parents don’t get to leave with their baby, the nurse said. Those parents have just one shot to commemorate their child.

Absolutely, Cherish replied.

On a busy evening a few weeks later, Cherish

hauled in her camera bag for a co-worker’s delivery. But there had also been a death that night, a 17-week-old baby, in a room down the hall.

“I just was like, OK, here we go,” she says.

FOR A FEW FLEETING HOURS, A FAMILY OF 4

After a few pushes, McKenzie delivers Blakely still in her amniotic sack. Nurses quickly shuttle the little one away, cleaning her up and handing her back to the couple, wrapped in a tiny pink blanket.

Having passed in utero a month before, Blakely didn’t look like they’d hoped, not like her brother.

Unfazed by the delivery room’s chaos, Calvin sleeps soundly in Clayton’s arms, his little chest rising and falling. For weeks, McKenzie had lived in fear that she’d lose Calvin, too. If she didn’t see him moving, didn’t feel his kicks, her mind ran wild with what ifs.

“Seeing him in the flesh and actually being able to hold him, you looked at him and it was complete joy,” McKenzie says. “And then you turn and see her, and it’s that reminder that, oh, yeah, it’s not just a happy time. It’s a sad time, too.”

Doctors told the couple that COVID-19 didn’t contribute to Blakely’s death, instead pointing to a placenta or umbilical cord issue. Research into COVID-19 in pregnant women is in its nascent stages, but a recent British study shows no connection between stillbirth and



McKenzie Harreld says the photos of her twins' birth taken by nurse Cherish Shuka offer physical proof that her daughter, Blakely, existed.

the virus.

Behind the lens, Cherish keeps her emotions at bay by clearing her mind, focusing intently on the task at hand — what's next, what's after that, and after that.

She moves about the room quietly as the couple holds the babies, grief and happiness in equal measure. She doesn't like to overwhelm parents with exact poses, just catch the natural, unvarnished emotion of the moment.

Click. Click. Click.

Clayton perches on the bed next to McKenzie; he holds Calvin, and McKenzie has Blakely. McKenzie leans her head against Clayton, eyes closed, smiling.

Click. Click. Click.

Cherish lays Blakely in her bassinet for close-ups,

“There’s a lot of shame behind (pregnancy loss), and I’m not sure why. But it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

McKenzie Harreld

her hands and her feet on the special blanket McKenzie's grandmother knitted. The young parents hold Calvin, oohing and aahing over him.

“You could hear her in there working, like, ‘Oh, these are really good,’ ‘Oh, this is cute. I like this,’” Clayton says. “It was just nice to know that, OK, they’re getting some good pictures.”

Click. Click. Click.

Cherish wraps up and leaves, hoping to edit and send the images before the Harrelds are discharged. They'd leave the hospital as a family of three, but Cherish wanted the mem-

ories of when they were four to be there, waiting in their inbox.

Blasting worship music on her drive home, Cherish cries and prays. She's still figuring out how to find peace after these shoots.

She texted one of her co-workers: *How the heck do you handle this? How do you go to work the next day and deliver a happy, healthy baby?*

BEING THERE FOR THE RAW, THE REAL, THE HURT

After a few devotions, Clayton pulls out “Time

for Bed” and starts to read.

“It’s time for bed, little mouse, little mouse. Darkness is falling all over the house,” he reads.

They'd had a few hours with their baby girl, more than women who have miscarriages, McKenzie says. But now she has to put her daughter down and never pick her up again.

“It’s time for bed, little goose, little goose. The stars are out and on the loose.”

They call in the nurse. They're ready to let her go, they say.

It’s time for bed, little cat, little cat. So snuggle in tight, that’s right, like that.

“You almost had to say goodbye twice,” McKenzie says. “You had to say goodbye when we found out that we lost her. And

then you had to say goodbye to her physical body a month later. And we know it's not 'goodbye.' It's 'see you later.' But it doesn't make it any easier."

When McKenzie said goodbye the first time, there were just a few days before calendars turned to October. Unexpectedly, her social media started surfacing stories of women who lost their babies, stories of people surviving and moving forward after the unthinkable. Sitting on her couch, one hand on her belly, McKenzie sopped up every word.

October, it turns out, is pregnancy and infant loss awareness month.

"That month was really hard for me, because I was trying to go through all those emotions," McKenzie says. "And it was really helpful hearing other people's stories and seeing all that stuff, because it helped me know I'm not alone. *We're* not alone in this."

"It might feel like this is the first time this has happened to anybody, but it's not."

Talking about Blakeley is a salve for the pain they know they'll feel forever. And in opening up, they've had more people than they ever would have imagined share their own story of loss.

In mutual despair, they have found mutual healing.

A young mother hoping to grow in her accounting career, McKenzie hasn't figured out exactly how she wants to create a space for women to be open with their stories. Publicly sharing her own, stepping in front of the lens, is sort of the first step, she says.

"There's a lot of shame

behind (pregnancy loss), and I'm not sure why," she says. "But it's nothing to be ashamed of. You don't have to keep it a secret because you're scared of what people might think."

Cherish shot a few more stillborn babies in addition to the Harrellds' and was the bedside nurse for one of those parents, helping them along their delivery journey as well as taking photos.

"Every single story is very hard," she says. "Every single time it happens is a dreadful thing."

"But it's something that I feel like is a way to give back to those women," she adds, "and to just come alongside them through every step of the process, being there during that labor, during that time with their baby and capturing those moments so that they can have those forever."

Behind the lens, Cherish faced her bogeyman.

As a documentarian, she experienced the heartbreak she feared while also finding a way to let patients look at the hardest thing they've gone

through and know they survived. Maybe a little broken, maybe a little battered, but here.

She can't save women from the hurt of losing their babies, but she can give them a way to reclaim the hurt.

"Walking through the hard times and getting, not past it, but growing through it together," Cherish says. "Just being there in the raw, the real, the hurt, the screaming, the crying, the grief, like being in that completely present, and completely raw and real with people is huge. I think we need more of that."

AN ABIDING COMMITMENT: BREAKING THE SILENCE

McKenzie's dad crafted the couple a wooden music box to hold Blakeley's mementos and, for now, her ashes. Inside, McKenzie keeps the nameplate that hung on her bassinet, her booties, a packet of forget-me-not seeds, and a few locks of her hair. Nestled among the keepsakes is a pendant

How the heck do you handle this? How do you go to work the next day and deliver a happy, healthy baby?

Cherish Shuka's text to a co-worker

a nurse gave her before discharge.

"From one angel mommy to another, may these petals bring you peace," reads the accompanying card, signed with peace and love by "Eva's Mommy," another mother of a stillborn child.

The Harrellds put off looking at Cherish's photos, fearing the memories they'd bring back. Friday after Friday they'd plan to look that weekend. Then, Sunday after Sunday they'd back out. *I'm not having a great day. I'm not ready. Not tonight.*

But by February, the time had come. With nothing on their schedule and Calvin asleep, the pair sat down on their couch and pulled out the photos. Her hands, her feet, the special blanket.

Physical proof, McKenzie says, that her baby existed.

"She did a really good job of capturing the things that we want to remember about Blakeley," Clayton says. "And keeping the good memories there and not some stuff that was hard to see."

The photos surfaced other memories, too: the joy of Calvin's birth — those alarm clock shrieks — their flashbulb eyes at the news of twins.

You go back to those moments where everything seems normal, Clayton says. But now, here, with these photos, they could marinate in the duality of their experience: pain and relief, joy and sadness, remembering and moving forward.

Four-month-old Calvin Blake is just starting to develop his personality. He recognizes Clayton and McKenzie now, smiles

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when they walk into the room. Recently he started saying “goo.” Once he gets going, Clayton says, you’ll hear him talking for a good 15 minutes.

And he has this smug face they each think is hilarious; not happy, not sad, just *chill*.

When they first got home, Clayton and McKenzie feared his milestones. Would they be able to be happy for him? Or would their first thought be sadness, knowing she was supposed to be right

alongside him?

For a while, it was both. But as time goes on, their first feeling is joy.

“I remember finding out (we lost her) and thinking like, ‘How are we going to get through this? How are we going to do this?’” McKenzie says. “There’s not an answer for that. You just figure it out.”

Grief isn’t like a play unfolding over set acts, they understand, so they take it as it comes. They try not to make large-

scale blueprints anymore, but to take life day by day.

When the snow melts, McKenzie wants to create a little outdoor space dedicated to her daughter. She’ll plant the forget-me-nots around a memory stone her mom inscribed with Blakely’s name and hang a special wind chime Clayton’s parents bought them.

With every gust will come a chorus of *ting, ting, tings*, she hopes, each one breaking the silence.



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