

CHOICE /LESS



VALERIE: WHY DO WE HIDE?

Jenn: Welcome to CHOICE/LESS, a storytelling podcast from Rewire Radio, about reproductive injustice and the laws that put people in choice-less situations.

I'm Jenn Stanley, senior staff reporter at Rewire, formerly RH Reality Check, and the host of this podcast.

Today we hear from Valerie, a single mother of two who lives in a suburb of Austin, Texas. Though many stay silent about their experiences with miscarriages and abortion, Valerie has told her story to multiple outlets, hoping to end the stigma surrounding these issues.

Valerie: My full name is Valerie Renee Peterson, Dr. Valerie Renee Peterson. I am 36 years old. I have two daughters, one is 19 and in college and the other is 16 and still living at home with me. I work in education and helping students not only go to college but persist in college.

Jenn: Valerie herself excelled academically. She was pregnant with her first daughter before finishing high school, but still went to college. She got pregnant again while she was an undergrad, and raised her two daughters while continuing school straight through her PhD. After having her second daughter, her doctors told her that she wouldn't be able to conceive again, and she was ok with that.

Valerie: My daughters always wanted a sibling ever since they were smaller. And they've always wanted a baby brother and so I had told them let's buy a dog that's a boy and that can be your baby brother. And so that's what I did I bought a dog that's a boy and said here's your baby brother.

Jenn: But in July of 2015, she found out she was pregnant.

Valerie: And so my initial response was i have to start all over. Here I was all summer bragging about being an empty nester by 40, and now I'm going to have another baby. So it was kind of just like, wow, this is really happening. But I knew that it was a pregnancy that I was going to keep, and I was going to nurture and make sure that I did everything that I needed to do to make sure that I had a healthy baby.

When I went to my initial OB appointment, I found out that I would be considered what's called a high risk pregnancy because I have high blood pressure. So not only would I have to see my obstetrician, I would also have to see a high risk maternal fetal medicine doctor. And I would see them every two weeks an then see my OB once a month initially.

Jenn: The shock of the news persisted through the early weeks of her pregnancy. But then she heard it's heartbeat and it began to feel real.

Valerie: I got not my first ultrasound because the first ultrasound it just kind of looked like a little pea you really couldn't see much but then I had another ultrasound and I could hear the heartbeat, and then I thought, this is really real, there's another person living inside of me.

Jenn: But at 12 weeks, the high risk doctor noticed that something might be wrong with the developing brain. He said it wasn't cause for alarm yet, but that he wanted to keep an eye on it, so she'd need to have another ultrasound in two weeks.

Then she found out she was having a boy, and her daughters would have the baby brother they always wanted.

Valerie: My daughters were excited. The day I found out the sex of the baby it was the doctor calling me on the phone telling me like all your genetics look good. She said, 'We did the genetic testing everything looks good you know we'll just keep going day by day. And by the way do you want to know the gender?'

And I said, 'Absolutely.'

And she said it was a boy, and I cried. I cried because I raised two girls and I not had a boy and so I was excited to have a son.

Jenn: But their excitement was short lived. At her 16-week ultrasound, it was clear that something was very wrong.

Valerie: It was the longest ultrasound that I've ever had. I actually had two different ultrasound techs and I knew based on what I was seeing with my own eyes that something was wrong. And when they brought the second ultrasound tech in I was sure something was wrong and they just needed to verify it. And then the doctor came in.

And he shook my hand. And he asked me what I knew so far. So he sat next to me and he said well let's go over the pictures together. And one by one by one, he went through each and every single picture of my baby's brain that they had. And as he went through each picture he explained what was there, and what wasn't there, and what was supposed to be there.

I just broke down. in tears, and crying. Because I knew that the baby wasn't going to be healthy.

My son ended up with a condition called alobar holoprosencephaly which basically means that his brain didn't divide into two halves like it should have.

There was also space in between the brain stem and the spinal chord and then the rest of his brain filled with fluid. And so um, I was told that that condition unfortunately was 100 incompatible with life.

There was no doubt in my mind at that time that I knew that the best thing for me emotionally the best thing for the baby, was to terminate the pregnancy.

Jenn: But Valerie had no idea how difficult it would be. She's originally from Chicago and had recently moved to Texas for her job. She'd always considered herself pro-choice, and while she'd seen some news coverage about abortion restrictions sweeping the nation, she had never paid much attention.

But she was about to come face-to-face with Texas' extreme abortion laws.

Valerie: So I turned to my doctor and I said oh ok, I mean, I've seen the pictures I've seen enough. Is this something that you put me in the hospital for to take care of? Is this something that we do? And his response was, 'Unfortunately not. Unfortunately in the state of Texas, it's still considered an elective procedure.' And then he told me, 'Unfortunately in Texas right now there's substantial waiting lists for terminations because of the lack of abortion clinics in the state.'

And I said, 'Well I need to get in tomorrow. There's no way that I can continue.'

I mean at this point I'm feeling the baby move. Every ultrasound picture he was waving to me. And I was really beginning to bond with my baby. And I told him that there's no way that I can keep going day by day knowing that my baby is gonna die. And so he, seeing how distraught I was, said he would make a personal call to the clinic.

Later that day I got a call from Planned Parenthood and it was the receptionist and she told me that she would be able to squeeze me in a week from today, which was at that point it was a Thursday. And at that point I accepted it because I thought that was my only option. Until she said, 'But this is going to be a multiple day process. Unfortunately in the state of Texas, on day 1 you have to go through a counseling session.'

She told me to plan on staying in Planned Parenthood all day because of the amount of people they had to see. That the counseling session would be over a couple of hours. They would do an ultrasound, show me pictures and show me videos and talk to me about other options, you know adoption and things of that nature.

Hearing that, I felt that that was extremely cruel. And then she said after that counseling session there's a 24 hour waiting period and that's mandatory in Texas and so after the 24 hour waiting period, once that is over because of how far along you are in the pregnancy which at that time would have been 17 weeks, we have to bring you in one day to dilate your cervix and we have to dilate your cervix over night. and then bring you in the next day to actually have the procedure. I didn't understand how something that happened so naturally could become so grueling and so cruel and full of red tape for me to get around.

Jenn: The red tape was caused by the state's restrictive abortion laws, including House Bill 2. HB 2 contains multiple restrictions, including a 20-week abortion ban, admitting privilege requirements, ambulatory surgical center requirements, reporting requirements, and restrictions on medication abortions.

It has forced nearly three-quarters of Texas clinics to close, which led to the long waiting periods for Valerie.

In March 2016, the bill was challenged in front of the Supreme Court in Whole Woman's Health vs. Hellerstedt. The decision could help determine how far states can go in chipping away at abortion access.

The mandatory waiting period and counseling session Valerie would have to face if she chose to terminate her pregnancy in Texas, was a different law, the Woman's Right to Know Act, passed in 2003.

Many states have similar laws, with waiting periods as long as 72 hours, and longer if it falls over a weekend. But in the doctor's office that day, Valerie didn't know any of this. She was overwhelmed with grief, and just wanted care from someone she trusted. Her friend was with her that day at the doctor's office, holding her hand through the devastating news.

Valerie: I was in tears. I remember her taking my car keys, because I had driven my car to the appointment. And I remember her taking my car keys and saying I'm going to drive you home.

And I just remember crying the whole time, and coming into the front door of my house with my daughter coming home from school. Just a mess, crying, and my dog worrying and trying to you know be close to me to kind of see what's wrong. I remember walking to the door and going straight into my bedroom. And closing the door, and just laid in the bed for the rest of the night. Hours. Um.

And I remember my friend she did a very good job explaining to my daughter what had happened, and they went out to dinner so they could leave me alone and give me some space. And I just remember it kind of felt like the end of the world for me.

Jenn: Her daughters took the news hard.

Valerie: They were sad. My daughter who is away at college she was actually crying because she was excited about having a little brother, but she understood that he was sick. And he, I named him Ethan, because Ethan means strong, and I feel like he was strong enough to last as long as he did that that was the most appropriate name for him.

They were in love with Ethan before he even got here. They were making plans about what it was going to be like to have a baby brother and things of that nature. It was a sad moment for them and even more sadder when they realized what I actually had to go through to terminate the pregnancy.

Jenn: Valerie had to travel to Florida, and the procedure wasn't covered by insurance. It cost her over \$5,000.

Valerie: My friend had a sister that lives in Florida, and knew of a hospital in Florida that specializes in women's care that has a place where they refer women for um, those who have to terminate for medical reasons, so that's kind of one of their specialties. And she told me that she could get me in touch with the nurse and doctor so that I could talk to them so they could tell me what the laws were in Florida because she was unaware of them. So that evening I talked to the nurse and the doctor in Florida and they did inform me that there would be a counseling session but it would be more along the lines of birth control options. She informed me that they would

still have to do an ultrasound but it was because they needed one: to see how big the baby was, and two: they would give me the option of looking at the screen or not looking at the screen, and three: depending on the size they would either have to dilate me overnight or not dilate me overnight.

And so I said, 'Well, ok, um, when is your first available appointment?'

And the lady said, 'Well we can get you in tomorrow morning.'

And I said, 'Well unfortunately I live in Texas, so I'm going to have to spend tomorrow flying to Florida to Orlando,' so I asked if they had weekend hours, and they did. And so she set me up with an appointment at 8:00 in the morning on Saturday

So I spent Friday flying to Florida, had to get a last minute plane ticket, had to find a hotel had to get a rental car, and in addition found out that the procedure was not covered by insurance because it is an elective procedure so I would have to pay out of pocket for everything including the procedure. I went to Florida, I got to Florida and they started the procedure at 8:00 in the morning, and I was back in the hotel by 1:00

So I told the doctors and the nurse that they needed to give me the best sedation that they had. I didn't want to remember anything. I didn't want to feel anything. I just I didn't even want to know what's going on.

And so I remember the nurse saying we got you, you'll be fine. And I remember her holding my hand right before they gave me the anesthesia, and I remember again the doctor looking at the ultrasound picture and saying again, 'You know these cases are so devastating, and I am so sorry.'

But I remember the nurse held my hand and I they gave me the anesthesia. But there's one thing I will never forget. I will never forget when they pulled him out, because I felt it and it was more than just pressure. It was I actually felt him leaving my body. And that is a feeling that I will never forget.

Jenn: Valerie says that when she returned from Florida, her dog, who she adopted to be her daughters' 'baby brother,' would not leave her side.

Valerie: absolutely now believe that animals can sense those things. I believe he sensed that I was pregnant, and I know that when I walked through that door after learning about the pregnancy not being viable that he sensed that, and I know that as soon as I returned from Florida that he knew the baby wasn't there anymore, because he would not leave my side.

He would sit by my bed and act like my security. Just lay there. And just stay there and not move, and if I didn't want him in the room he would stand at the door and scratch and bark and whine. And if I let him in he would just lick my face and just sit down next to me, and to me that was a message that he was saying, 'I'm here for you. Let me love on you, let me nurture you let me help you through this.' And I was very open to it at that point.

Jenn: Valerie terminated her pregnancy in October 2015.

Valerie: I was beginning to show. People knew I was pregnant. And people get excited for you when you're pregnant. And then when the loss happens, you don't want to face those people who previously celebrated you, who now have to say I'm sorry for your loss, or is there anything I can do for you?

It was just a very tough learning process for me, that has changed my views on women and women's rights. And how, we do have a right, and we do know what's best for our bodies, especially when we have a good medical provider like I did, educating us through the journey. It consumed my mind, and it also consumed my interactions with women. What is it about us that we hide painful things deep inside? We all are women, we all go through some of the same things. So why don't we remove the stigma around certain women's health care things, and tell people what it's really like.

Jenn: Had she been forced to carry to term, she would have had to continue on until her April due date, knowing that her very wanted pregnancy would never result in a healthy, living son.

This episode was produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio. With editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our director of multimedia. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief. Brady Swenson is our director of technology. Music in this episode was by Doug Helsel and Robert Andersson, producer of the Awful Grace podcast.

For more information on Valerie's story, and for comprehensive news, commentary, and analysis on other reproductive and sexual health issues, visit our website at Rewire.news.

Thanks for listening.