

## Karen's Story

The story of my younger daughter Sophie's birth starts really with the birth of my elder daughter Hannah, 3 and a half years ago. It was unfortunately not a great experience. I won't go in to detail (see Karen's story under the ventouse section on this website) but basically I felt bullied, judged, traumatised and experienced the cycle of medical intervention I have since read much about. I was left feeling deeply shocked, like I had completely lost control and had somehow 'failed' as a woman to birth my baby successfully.

It took a long time to get over and I experienced post traumatic stress and depression. My relationship with my husband suffered and I finally started to get help to process what had happened about a year later. Counselling helped us both enormously as did simply the passage of time.

Eventually our thoughts turned to growing our family and whether we could really do it all again. Tentatively, I started to read about birth, talk to people knowledgeable about birth and I learnt a lot. I learnt mainly to let go of my misplaced guilt and that birth did not need to be like that!

Once we felt brave enough to make the decision to try for another child I was very lucky and got pregnant quickly. For the first part of my pregnancy I tried not to worry too much about the birth but as time passed I knew I was starting to obsess about it again, re-running my memories of Hannah's birth over and over. When I was about 4 months pregnant, close friends of ours had a very poor birth experience in a hospital, in fact both mother and baby nearly lost their lives (now thankfully fine). Hearing their dramatic story really shook me up and made me examine what I was feeling about the birth and also face the fact that I was very nervous indeed about going in to hospital again.

Looking for ways to 'stack the odds more in my favour' as I put it, I started investigating Doula's, and chose Kim Bradie (based in Edinburgh), who was a wonderful support. At some point along the way I started to realise that what I actually wanted was a home birth. I remembered the part of my labour with Hannah that I'd done at home as pretty good and associated everything going pear-shaped with the move to hospital and introduction of various drugs, monitoring and other interventions. I also tried to project forwards in to the future and imagine what I would love to be able to say about this birth if it all went well. What actually popped in to my imagination was texting friends and relatives after the birth saying 'Baby Sophie/Jamie, born at home, weighing XXX' and so on and it made me break in to a huge smile! This was what I had been looking for.

My community midwives were great and happy with the idea (in fact on hearing my first birth story at my booking-in appointment one midwife had even suggested home birth but at that stage I'd been too nervous and uninformed to make that decision so had said no). I now felt instinctively that it was right, that I would cope better and be more relaxed and be better placed to retain control of my choices.

My reading was crucial. Ina May Gaskin's 'Guide to Childbirth', a couple of Nicky Wesson's books (one about home birth, one about labour pain) and the fantastic 'Birthing from Within' by Pam England set the tone for what I wanted to achieve. I thought about how I would use techniques in some of them in my labour and mainly I lapped up the wonderful positive birth stories in them, reprogramming my own

perception of birth. Slowly but surely I built faith in my body and confidence in my own ability to do this! My mother joined me on this journey, reading the books I did and telling me I was a strong woman who she knew would be fine which meant a huge amount to me! We had some wonderful phone calls during this time.

My husband was also so supportive. I owe him much respect for over-coming his own fears, particularly as a close member of his family had suffered a still-birth a number of years earlier. He did me a huge favour by first accepting and then believing that a home birth and Doula were things that would help me to give birth in a calm, relaxed atmosphere. At one point he did ask if I wanted to sell tickets as the list of attendees was getting quite long! I knew from the start that I wanted lots of supporters at the birth (I had the 2 midwives, Kim, my husband and my mum) and on the day I really did love the circle of support they spun around me as Sophie made her way in to the world.

I became a woman on a mission. I did a local pre-natal yoga which was great. We also did a Hypnobirthing course as a couple, which, whilst not all of it was for us, was useful in terms of the focus on positive thinking about birth, recognising the power of the subconscious and the deep relaxation techniques. For the rest of the pregnancy I did lots of relaxation and meditation using CDs from the course, I also listened regularly to a CD of 'Birthing Affirmations' full of lovely, positive statements about birth.

The day itself arrived just a few days after my due date. Overall I am delighted to say that it was a wonderful experience. I suppose the facts of the birth are that I had Sophie at home (hurray – still makes me smile!), that it all took about 7/8 hours in total from first twinges, I used a birth pool and had Sophie in the living room at 5.45am, a very bouncing 9lb 13oz. She has been a very calm and easy-going baby ever since her birth (nearly 10 weeks at time of writing).

I remember realising in the evening, around 7pm that my braxton hicks tightenings, which I always have lots when pregnant, seemed to be getting regularly spaced though not uncomfortable. I remember telling Hannah when I put her to bed 'may be our baby will arrive tonight, wouldn't that be amazing if you woke up and the baby was here?' As it turned out that is exactly what happened.

I went to lie down in bed at around half eight as I think I knew labour was coming, I felt quite disconnected and lay listening to my relaxation CD and possibly dozed a little. By 10pm contractions had started properly (every 5 minutes but quite short, about 30-40 seconds) and I told Jim and we started to get organised, letting the on call midwife know, saying that we didn't need her yet but 'tonight was the night' so to speak. We got set up in the living room, sofa bed out, birth pool up and slowly filling with water. I think we asked Kim to come some time towards midnight.

My main memories of that first stage were wanting my back rubbed during each contraction which were steadily getting longer and more often, lolling forward on huge cushions, then I had a stage where I had hot water bottles put on my back one after another. I felt my labour in my back mainly, as I had with Hannah. The lights were off but our open fire was on and candles were lit and it all seemed very quiet and peaceful. I had my relaxation music on earphones and I just concentrated on breathing through each contraction, staying calm and floppy and thinking positive thoughts and enjoying the gaps in between. Like Birthing From Within says, 'do nothing more', I just sort of let it happen. With my first birth I was much more

'logical' if that's the right word, wanting to know how long contractions were, how far apart, how many centimetres dilated I was etc, but this time I just didn't think about all that very much.

I tried to welcome contractions by thinking 'wow that was a good one' when I'd had a particularly long or intense one. I also visualised lots, sometimes picturing my cervix opening, sometimes just a beach or waves, lots of things. I worked to keep my pelvic floor relaxed and breathed relaxation down through my body.

I remember being pleased when the pool was full as I wanted to get in. The feeling of the warm water was wonderful and it's also great to be able to move so freely, sway here and there, ease aching legs, knees etc. I think I must have been nearly fully dilated as I went in the pool around 2am ish. I carried on taking one contraction at a time. At some point perhaps around 3am I started to feel real pressure, which after a while Diane, the wonderful midwife who had arrived around midnight, explained to me was the bag of waters. I was making sort of pushing noises and bearing down involuntarily and then the bag popped. At this stage it seemed the baby wouldn't be long, I remember hearing them phone for the 2<sup>nd</sup> midwife and being very pleased that my mum had arrived in time, having driven through the night from North Yorkshire after my phone call at 10pm. I think she arrived around 2.30/3am ish. I was getting great help from Kim at this stage with my breathing, my husband has since told me she was helping me not to speed up too much, I would end up gulping for air a bit and Kim kept helping me find my rhythm again.

The pain in my back became more intense and at points I had to work hard to keep on top of it. I'd started using gas and air to help for 3 big breaths in at the beginning of each contraction and that really helped me. I also have memories of opening my eyes wide open in the strongest contractions, my mum told me she knew which were big ones because my eyes would pop wide open! I found gentle moaning really helped and remember thinking about one of my yoga classes where we talked about vocalising during labour, I experimented with different pitched sounds and found the resonance of some really helpful with the pain. I also have strong memories of talking to myself in my head, telling myself I was a strong woman, I automatically used my maiden name, like I was reminding myself who I was, that I was strong and could do this. I used distraction techniques too, focusing on what other things I could hear, see and feel during contractions.

One of my strongest visualisations I used in the most intense part of labour followed on from how I was blowing out hard at the peak of contractions, I was blowing and swaying my head from side to side and I suddenly visualised myself as a fire-breathing dragon! The fire (my breath) was the pain being blown out, away from me, and the image made me feel very strong and powerful when I needed it most. I used lots of different techniques to help me, some I'd read about, some just felt right for me.

Once I was pushing Diane coached me to help me make more of my efforts and use my breath to help me. However, despite over an hour of hard work – nothing much happened! I could feel myself that the contractions were tailing off, and the intense urge to push was becoming less frequent. I had also sensed that the baby wasn't coming down. I had a feel for myself and could feel the baby's head but it seemed to be stuck where it was.

Diane also realised this and I clearly remember her saying gently at one point that I had been pushing for over an hour and twenty minutes and as things seemed to be slowing down it was perhaps time to try something different. This must have been between 4 -5am. In fact I had fallen asleep momentarily twice in between contractions – a bit of a giveaway! She told me later that she realised I was getting very comfortable and tired in that pool and that I still had quite a bit of hard work ahead of me if we were to get this baby born at home, so she wanted to just double check to see if there was any obvious reason for things slowing down. She also really wanted me to try and eat or drink something to get some more energy on board. I did have some lucozade.

I agreed to get out of the pool for my one and only internal exam, she was great, very gentle and quick and was very positive (as she was throughout) telling me that the great news was that I was definitely fully dilated (I'd worried out loud at one point that maybe I wasn't dilated fully and this was why the baby wasn't coming down) but said the baby was back to back so we just needed to try some different positions to help her down.

I got back on my feet and tried some standing positions. Leaning forward didn't seem to work so well and it was when we tried an unusual backwards-leaning semi-squat, suggested by the second midwife Ros, supported by holding on to her arms that things started to really get going again. The midwives did tell me they were happy for me to get back in the pool but as things were going well again I decided to stay where I was. When I was leaning right forward, as I had been in the pool, Sophie's head had been caught against my pelvic bone and as I was folded up there wasn't room for her to get under it. When I started leaning back she was able to dip under and come down, turning anterior as she did. (She was born with a caput on her head, a small raised swelling of fluid as a result of this stage of being a bit stuck, but this went down very quickly.) All in all 2<sup>nd</sup> stage took about 2.5 hours.

My memories of the actual birth were of this amazing circle of support around me, by this stage I was on the floor squatting but leaning back in to the lap of first my husband, then my mum and finally Kim (we needed someone with yoga-fit legs and flexible hips to support me so my husband and Mum gladly passed on the baton to Kim!). I remember them all encouraging me and hearing all these different voices individually but also feeling like there was this big chorus of love and encouragement. I remember hearing my husband telling me I could do it then after a few contractions after she crowned, out came our beautiful Sophie. I remember being surprised at how much hard work it was to deliver her body and shouting for someone to help! I couldn't understand why she still hadn't made it out once her head had emerged! I remember the amazing feeling of her whole body swivelling round to face my leg once her head was out – how amazing birth is.

Her shoulders actually got a little stuck and the midwives rocked me back further on to my back with knees up, gave a very slight helping wiggle and out she came, at 5.45am. I didn't feel it at the time but I had a small but deep tear along my old episiotomy scar. I remember looking at her on the floor, wide-eyed and amazed (both of us) and just staring at her until Diane said 'you can pick up your baby Karen'. It was wonderful, no-one else touched her, I scooped her up and cuddled her and we just all sat looking at her. She made a few tiny little cries. I remember the feel of her skin against me and her eyes staring up at me and also thinking she didn't look newborn as she was massive! Once the cord stopped pulsing, my mum was delighted to cut it for us.

My euphoria and the relief was amazing. The icing on the cake was then hearing Hannah call down the stairs having just woken up, 15 minutes after the birth. My husband went to get her and brought her in, wide-eyed and amazed. I was so delighted that she'd been able to stay at home and to see Sophie so quickly after her birth. She said to me 'you were right mummy!' and I remembered I'd told her may be she would arrive that night.

I tried for a natural 3<sup>rd</sup> stage but the placenta took quite a while, my contractions started up again very intensely eventually and I struggled with basically being back in labour when I felt totally spent and needed lots of support from Kim at this point (mum and Jim were looking after Hannah and Sophie). I then asked for the syntometrin but even that didn't help. There was mention of possible transfer to hospital at which I did feel fairly panicked but Kim came in with some homeopathic things which I took and we also tried putting Sophie to the breast which Ros suggested and she had a really good feed for about 15 minutes I think and finally I managed to then deliver the placenta after about an hour and a half in total, mightily relieved not be going to hospital. All that was left was a bit of stitching which they numbed me up for with some injections and was absolutely fine. Then finally a wonderful bath and up in to bed with a cup of tea. Then of course I could send some celebratory text messages just as I had imagined!

Overall it was an amazing and healing experience for me.

I should add that I was blessed with amazing midwives – they didn't insist on doing internal exams (which I'd found very difficult with Hannah's birth) or make me feel like I was being rushed at all, made very positive comments thru out, were very respectful and hands off but experienced enough to know when to intervene and were creative when they did. They also worked very well together as a team. My other supporters were all wonderful too.

It's a very personal thing and I'm glad I followed my instincts by doing lots of preparation beforehand and by having lots of supporters, a birth pool and delivering at home. I had also developed a strong confidence that all would be well this time, and it was! A key lesson I have learnt is that what was important to me was not so much the 'facts' of the birth, i.e. 'what' happened but 'how' it happened, how supported we felt, calm and safe and in control.