

Myrl & Kate's Story



A note: in the time between when I initially wrote this and now, our older kiddo has told us that they identify as a girl, mostly, though at the moment they would like to change pronouns in the morning and afternoon and every other day. So I'm just gonna use they/them pronouns as a reminder to all of us that we never know anything about our kiddo's gender just based on their sex. Also, since they are people in the world, but not yet really able to consent, we try not to use their names when we talk about them on the internet. So, here are the stories of kid #1 and kid #2 and how we came to be their parents.

Our Story: Kate and I met approximately a thousand years ago, in college. We took a sexual assault hotline counselor course together, and became, throughout college, dear friends, though we didn't start dating until after college, in 2006.

Our journey to having kids was long and involved a lot of frustration and adaptation along the way. We knew that we both wanted kids, and that we were also each interested in being pregnant at some point in our lives, and so decided to try to create a family-with-kids that way. We started trying to get pregnant in 2011, after much thought about who would carry first. I am younger than Kate, so in some ways it made sense for her to try first, but I'm also trans and was, at that time, in grad school in Minnesota, and so I thought that maybe being in the safety of our queer fam and not having to embark on the job market for 3 or 4 more years, I would feel supported and seen as a pregnant trans person.

We asked two cis guy friends, who both said no, which was hard. The third friend (friend of a friend, really) said yes, and we embarked upon a three year known-donor dance that involved a lot of mason jars of jizz and driving back and forth to Duluth where he lived. We eventually paid a clinic for him to submit to all kinds

of testing so he could donate sperm “formally” and we could have samples frozen for IUIs, which involved a six month quarantine of dubious legality (the clinic swore it was absolutely legally necessary for it to be frozen, but wouldn’t have been so if we were straight and actually sleeping with our friend). Homophobia sucks.

We tried a number of medicated in-clinic IUIs with our frozen sperm, again navigating heterosexism and transphobia throughout the process from the seemingly-friendly, expert, upscale fertility clinic where only the people using donor sperm was required to see their in-house psychologist, and “ladies” was the standard term of address for anyone with a uterus. Then, in 2013, Kate’s mom died, and we took a break from trying to conceive, because by that time the emotional rollercoaster of trying was truly beginning to wear on us. By the time we started trying again, I was nearing the end of my PhD program and embarking on the job market season. The idea of being a pregnant trans person on a notoriously impossible job market stressed me out, so we switched to Kate trying. We did two tries with her and our known donor sperm, and then we took a break when I got a job and we moved across the country to rural Maine.

We started trying again once we were settled in Maine and we found our closest clinic, which was an hour away. We also decided to move on from our known donor sperm and buy sperm bank sperm. By that point, I had been diagnosed with that mysterious catch-all, “unexplained infertility.” We had no idea if it was me or our friend’s infertility - despite his sperm having tested as “viable”, he is a gay, cigarette smoking, 50 year old, so we thought it was worth exploring different sperm, even though letting go of the idea of a known donor was sad and hard for us. We went away on a little vacay to Montreal and chose our sperm (which is WEIRD! It’s kind of eugenics-y and all of our unconscious class stuff came out, when you can see someone’s SAT scores) and bought two vials.

On the first try with our fancy store-bought sperm Kate got pregnant. And amidst the joy of it, I was actually incredibly devastated and jealous that Kate was able to get pregnant and I couldn't. As a trans person it felt like a referendum on my body, like I was well and truly not invited to the parenting party. It was a hard time, and my grief definitely took up a lot of space in an experience that should have been joyful for us both, and I felt a lot of guilt for detracting from Kate's experience of pregnancy. Therapy helped, but we still had a lot of hard and sad moments during our pregnancy together. And amidst all of that, my one year Visiting Assistant Professor gig was coming to an end, and we didn't know yet what the future held. And when Kate was about 26 weeks pregnant, we moved to Richmond, VA for me to take a tenure-track job at VCU. Our first kiddo was born in late October, 2015, 16 days overdue.

We have two kiddos, and their conception stories, and our story of becoming their parents, are incredibly different. It took years to make kiddo #1 (henceforth known as k1). Tried with both uteruses, probably 25 unmedicated at home ICIs with known donor sperm from a friend, then at least six in-clinic unmedicated IUIs with both frozen and fresh known donor sperm, one medicated IUI, over a period of three years, then we switched sperm and poof, pregnant. With kiddo #2 (henceforth known as k2), we switched back to Myrl and stuck with the fancy store-bought sperm, and again, pregnant on the first try.

Both of us were fortunate to have largely healthy and uncomplicated pregnancies, though as a cis woman and a transmasculine person, our experiences of being recognized and supported as pregnant people out in the world were wildly different. Kate got knowing smiles from other women, quick congratulations from acquaintances, questions about how she was feeling and when the due date was, and unsolicited advice from everyone. While internally she felt more like a cool science experiment than the goddess mama she had been taught to

expect, her social experience of pregnancy was pretty normative. Outside of our friends and family who were consistently supportive and caring, the most common response to Myrl's pregnancy was...nothing. The majority of people we interacted with out in the world seemed almost entirely unable to recognize or believe they were seeing a pregnant masculine person (or maybe too uncomfortable to acknowledge it) and so Myrl's pregnancy experience, even at 8 and 9 months pregnant, was largely one of flying under the radar.

Both babies took their sweet time about actually being born, and so both our birthing experiences still feel epic even years later. Both babies were born with the VCU midwives and a doula. Kate carried kiddo #1, and at 42 weeks she was induced. For the two weeks prior, we had done ALL. THE. THINGS. We had just moved to Richmond that summer, and so got to know our neighborhood by taking miles long walks after the heat broke each evening. But at 42 weeks, still no sign of kiddo, so we went into the hospital for Kate to be induced. It was long, and really hard, and pretty scary. We labored and labored and labored, navigated decisions and adapted our plan as things went. But 36 hours later, I caught our kiddo and tried my damndest to not drop that slippery wiggly little thing.

Myrl carried kiddo #2, and that time 40 weeks also rolled around with no signs of them making any moves to join us anytime soon. At 41 weeks we got serious about working on getting that kiddo born, doing all sorts of things to get labor moving, once again working with the VCU midwives and our doula. Eventually, after two nights of castor oil contractions at home that petered out by morning we went into the hospital, and with the help of low dose pitocin, kiddo #2 was born. Kate caught them, and came to snuggle with all three of us, and after the placenta was delivered she put them to her breast and they nursed basically right away. I had had top surgery before k1 was born, and didn't want to try and nurse, and we had prepared to get some bullshit about Kate

nursing. Fortunately, we'd done some advocacy for ourselves, at our doula's encouragement, to make sure no one gave us any grief about the non-gestational parent nursing in the hospital. Kate had an HIV test, and we brought those test results with us, and the midwives spoke with the nursing staff on the postpartum floor. And so we didn't get any pushback, and Kate was so practiced and k2 was so good at it, that they were able to get right down to nursing right away.

Nursing is never completely easy, though. k1 had what turned out to be a dairy and soy sensitivity, which we learned about because at about 4 weeks they started screaming ALL THE TIME. k1 would latch on greedily and then pull off screaming. They cried HARD for at least eight hours a day. Really, if they were awake, they were crying, and we were a mess. We saw I think four lactation consultants, plus our dismissive pediatrician, who all gave us wildly different advice or told us it was "just colic" or the "purple crying period". Finally at about 12 weeks the fourth lactation consultant recommended cutting dairy, which ultimately seemed to ease things. By then k1's sleep was pretty messed up, though, and k1 didn't sleep for more than an hour or two (mostly 40 minutes) at a stretch until 18 months. All that is to say that the first year was hard!

With k2, Kate was re-lactating and taking domperidone to boost her supply, and also gave up dairy preemptively. She had pumped every two hours for weeks before the birth, but even still, k2 cried and cried their little heart out in their first few days and nursed up a STORM because they wanted more milk than her body was making. Miraculously her body made more (boobs are amazing!) and they put on the weight they needed. She took Domperidone and breastfed/pumped almost exclusively for a year and now, having just turned two, k2 still nurses every night before bed.

Regarding provider's being/not being LGBTQ-friendly/competant: this is what I will say about this - ultimately, none of our providers

were reliably able to separate out a body's capacity for doing something (like growing a human) with their gendered ideas about that capacity. The queer thing was easier for them than the trans thing, for sure. The issue is that in general gendered ideas are SO baked in to ideas about parenting in general, and this is definitely true in the birth/midwifery world, which is really focused on birthing as an exercise in women's essential power. Ultimately that is trying to take back power from the medical world, and I understand it, but there IS a feminist way to think about pregnant and birthing people and bodies, rather than just collapsing it all into "women." But the midwives really struggled with it.

Interestingly, I had to have some experience with OBs while I was pregnant, because I got the flu, and then pneumonia, when I was 33 weeks pregnant with k#2, which is too soon to be a patient of the midwives, and so I was admitted for three days under the care of the OBs. And I had great gender-competent care, in general, from the OBs. The admitting OB used my correct pronouns immediately, without asking. I hilariously did have a med student who rounded on me and asked if I had a husband. Which is probably the first time in 20 years someone thought I was straight. I laughed so hard I think I accidentally shamed him.

One experience sticks out, and I think it illustrates how all of the transphobia and fat-shaming came together for me: Kate and I went in for our regular prenatal appointment for k#2, and one of the midwives had a student with her. I think I was 35 weeks or something? I'd gained 11 pounds. She asked the student "How much weight should a level one obese woman gain?" And the student looked embarrassed, and because I've spent so much time trying to placate people socially and overcompensate for people's confusion about my gender, I wasn't even offended in the moment. And the student answered "15-20 pounds." Which I already knew, because we had talked about it At. Every. Appointment. And then the (skinny) midwife launched into a whole story about how I need to make better choices about my eating, but when she was pregnant she gained 75 pounds no matter what

she did and it was terrible and I should watch what I eat. Then she asked if I had ever been on testosterone, and before really listening to my answer (I had not, at that point), she launched into a whole story about another trans patient who was partnered with another trans person who had a hard time nursing (as, it turns out, so do a lot of people, regardless of having been on hormones). But the way she said it was: “A woman living as a man, who was married to a man living as a woman, had taken all those hormones, which really mess up nursing, and she ended up not being able to nurse.” There was so much happening, I couldn’t even parse it out. Kate and I were appalled. We were like, “probably that person went by he/him pronouns.” And she was like “I didn’t get into all that, it doesn’t matter.” And I said something like, “Well it may not matter to you, but it DOES matter to me: I go by he/him pronouns.” And it wasn’t even clear why she had told the story! I wasn’t planning on nursing, which she knew! And I hadn’t been on hormones, for that matter. So her whole HIPAA violating story was apropos of nothing (because how many trans men married to trans women patients of that hospital have there been in the last few years?). Of the midwife group, one seemed actively transphobic, and some others seemed like they were on personal journeys of discovery around it, and often, even despite folks best efforts or intentions, we felt like mascots or guinea pigs in the process. But, as we mentioned above, we had also experienced incredibly frustrating garden variety homophobia throughout the process, even in progressive and “queer-friendly” Minneapolis, from different requirements for counseling to different requirements for sperm quarantines for folks who were straight and those who were using donor sperm.

Parenting is a hoot, and is fucking exhausting, and we are so so grateful to be doing it with one another, and in a broader queer/trans/nb/multi-racial/activist community where our kids can feel seen and supported, be challenged and questioned, and also see so many different, unusual, and fabulous ways of existing. We think and talk a lot about raising white kiddos in a white

supremacist culture, about how to support the full range of their gender embodiment and identity, how to foster empathy and kindness, how to teach and respect consent, and how to raise them in a collapsing world. Our kids are now 4.5 and 2, and we feel like we have lived an entire lifetime with them, and we could write and write and write about it.... but unfortunately, because we're also up to our eyeballs in keeping up with them we don't have the space to do that. Maybe when they are teenagers and won't talk to us any more we can get back around to this question?