

Katie and Allison's Story

Our love story started out like something in a good soap opera. In 2012 I was a charge nurse at a hospital in Roanoke, VA when a group of new graduate nurses started on our unit. Allie was one of them. We hit it off right away with our love of music, tie dye and the outdoors.

I knew she was a lesbian and had a girlfriend, and I was married at the time to a man. At first we were just friends but I noticed pretty soon that we had a different connection. My marriage was on the rocks, and although I had never been with a woman quickly we were swept up in a whirlwind romance. It was a big deal at work because I was her supervisor, but we tried to keep it professional as possible. Although the timing of it was less than ideal, I realized I had met the love of my life and couldn't just let her go. After some rough months, I separated from my husband, she broke up with her girlfriend, and we've been inseparable ever since.

We decided to leave Virginia in 2014 and pursue travel nursing all over the country. Our families were struggling with our relationship, and we needed to feel free to be ourselves and to create a new identity in places we knew no one. This country is full of amazing, non judgemental people and we were blessed to live in 12 states with friends all over. On the road we learned there were so many people just like us, not afraid to be out and proud. I remember the first time we felt comfortable holding hands in public. It was in Portland, OR, almost two years into our relationship. It felt like such a big deal.

We decided to start a family in 2016 after we bought a home in Asheville, NC and met with our local fertility clinic. I knew it may be a struggle for me to get pregnant because of my history. In 2011 with my

ex-husband I had a ruptured ectopic pregnancy, and had to undergo emergency surgery. A little over three months later I miscarried twins. I found out I was born with a septum in my uterus, which can cause early miscarriages, and had two surgeries to try to correct it. Despite all of this, I still desperately wanted to carry a child. My wife had no desire to be pregnant, and so even though we knew it may be more difficult we decided to start with me.

Like many couples, none of our fertility treatments were covered by insurance. We started with IUI because it was much cheaper and less stressful than IVF. We found a wonderful sperm bank in Seattle our friends had used, and painstakingly picked out our donor. We wanted someone who had similar features as my wife. While I have curly blonde hair and blue eyes, she has dark straight brown hair and hazel eyes. Her complexion is darker than mine. So that's how we started our search. The next important thing to us was intelligence, family history and overall connection we felt to the person.

We tried IUI five times with no success. Our mental and physical savings were drained.

We even explored using a known donor to cut costs. While he is a wonderful, caring friend who agreed to help us, the thought of going through the legal process and him having to get testing seemed like a lot more work and time than we could invest at this point. Something big had to happen because we were drowning in debt by this point. We made a big decision and ended up selling our home we loved. Moving into a short school bus we had converted into an RV (the cool kids call them skoolies) and my wife started travel nursing again. Her insurance from the new job would cover part of IVF, and the money we made from our home could pay the debts of all the failed IUIs. So we started living in a home on wheels that was less than 150sq ft with our two dogs, and drove that bus (we named her Stella Blue) to Tuscon, Arizona where we began IVF the day after we arrived in town.

I was lucky enough to not have to work during our IVF cycle, although living in a tiny home was not necessarily a walk in the park a lot of the time. Over 100 painful shots were given to me by my wife in that bus. Our clinic recommended we go to Mexico to pick up the fertility drugs to save money, so we did that too. We found a new donor with the same Seattle clinic since our previous donor was no longer available. It was a new moon on the day they implanted three precious embryos into my uterus. I felt that was a good sign because new moons signal a time for new beginnings. None of our other embryos made it, so this was IT for us. Amazingly, we got pregnant with one precious little babe. Going in for blood tests and ultrasounds were extremely stressful. You don't want to get your hopes up so early but too bad. You're already so attached to that little soul. We would breathe sighs of relief every week of good news.

My pregnancy overall was easy and uncomplicated. I also was blessed with a wife who is incredibly supportive and caring and took care of me when I needed it. The first trimester was rough at times with morning sickness but by the time we drove the bus to Reno, Nevada for my second trimester I was feeling great! We decided to move out of our precious skoolie and into an apartment, because I needed more space and comforts for my growing belly. We had a real toilet for the first time in six months! The experience was amazing though, and we have great stories of our adventures to tell our kids one day.

Our OB in Reno was accepting and excited for us and we never felt like we were treated differently than other couples. We did have a bit of a complication at our 20 week ultrasound. They couldn't find the fingers on our baby's right hand. They did a repeat ultrasound with the same results. Our doctor told us not to worry about it, that the chance of something being wrong with our baby's hand was very rare and she thought the babe was just being stubborn and not opening up his hand.

So we tried not to stress because chances were nothing was wrong and I so desperately wanted her to be right.

When we moved to Richmond, VA for the third trimester we found a birth center that more aligned with our values and desires for birth and postpartum. They were caring and excited to have a same sex couple at their center. Unfortunately I went two weeks overdue and had to be induced, and after a 48 hour labor at the local hospital it ended in a csection.

I wish I could say our experience at the hospital was like everywhere else we had been, but it wasn't. Our amazing, experienced doula we were lucky enough to hire was not accepted at this particular hospital. They treated my midwife terribly and almost didn't let her in to just have a visit with me. At every single turn we were met with resistance during my labor. I was determined as a nurse myself not to feel bullied but that's exactly what happened. Apart from a couple stand out nurses, we were not supported and honestly, I'm still trying to recover from that experience. I went to the right people, took steps to have an informed birth with our wishes respected and that still wasn't how our experience was. But that incredible moment you hear your baby cry for the first time...that is a life changing moment.

We found out the sex of our son at birth, although we had both felt it was a boy all along. He was beautiful, healthy and so alert, and also missing four fingers on his right hand. He was born with symbrachydactyly, a condition that affects 1 in 32,000 births. There is no known cause, but I still struggled with guilt for a long time after he was born. I still have moments of guilt at the extra challenges he has to face, but now he is six months old and he's already astonished us at how well he uses that little hand. He's going to amaze and inspire people with the things he can do.

After Atlas was born, Allie really got to bond. She had never been around babies before and he was so tiny! But she says the love and bond for her son was instant. Throughout the pregnancy that was her baby just as much as mine. The biological connection didn't matter to her and he loves her so much. Everyday she comes home from work and he flashes the biggest smile and is excited to be with his Mama. When people ask who the Mom is we reply both of us, because she is no less of a Mom than I am. We make a great team and are blessed in so many ways. Although sleep is a hot commodity nowadays, motherhood is everything I've dreamed of and so much more. We can't wait to see who Atlas becomes and for all the adventures ahead with his Mommy and Mama.

We came back to Virginia permanently after the birth of our son. We've come full circle and grown so much as individuals and a couple. And for the first time in a long time, it feels good to be home. Our families have been much more accepting and very involved in our son's life since we moved back. We are very different people, but we love them and they love us and our son. Over the years we've learned to hold true to our beliefs, no matter how hippie or different they're considered to be. We've also gotten so much support from friends all over the country. I won't know where we'd be without our chosen family who have embraced and accepted us from day one. Lastly social media has helped us so much because we see queer families all the time. When I was growing up I never knew gay people could have children. Visibility is important. It reminds us there are so many people like our family, living for themselves and their happiness and that our family really isn't that different after all.

I was, and still am nervous about our family living in SW Virginia instead of a progressive bigger city. I don't want Atlas to be the only child around with same sex parents. I want him to be proud of our family. We want Roanoke to be a loving and accepting place for all individuals.

Homophobia is still very prevalent everywhere, but so is racism and bigotry. I want a world where every human is treated equal. We all have to work together to change the mindset, and raising our children around people who are different than them is a start. Having hard conversations early, being visible in the community for others that may not feel comfortable. I also want a world where we live closer to nature and respect Mother Earth. Where we grow our own food, and we know and help our neighbors.

I want Atlas to grow up where different is encouraged. I'm done walking on eggshells for people that don't feel comfortable around us. I can't guarantee our son won't have difficulties or teasing, but he will grow up and know we are proud of him no matter what. We worked so hard to get here, and I hope he will know he is so wanted and perfect just the way he is. And also that his Moms will fight for our family and our way of life. For now we make a point to surround ourselves with people that celebrate our family, not just tolerate it. And that the best thing we can do.