



SHARE Atlanta, a support group for people who have experienced miscarriage, has provided the Angel Garden at Arlington Memorial Park in Sandy Springs and dedicated it to the memory of all children whose brief presence touched people's hearts. The garden consists of an angel sculpture and bricks inscribed with the names of young, lost lives.

REMEMBERING SMALL SOULS

Increase in miscarriages, and empathy, leads to growth in support groups, memorials

Helena Oliviero - Staff
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Jennifer Greer and her husband, Braxton, named children who never cried, never took a step, never drew a breath: Jesse, Jamie and Jacob. Three times Greer tried to have children. Three times she miscarried.

Jesse, Jamie and Jacob are among the lost pregnancies immortalized at the Angel Garden at Arlington Memorial Park in Sandy Springs, their names etched in smooth bricks framed by a grassy knoll as the soothing notes of wind chimes serenely fill the air. An angelic statue perpetually scans the heavens in remembrance as the word "Hope" on one wing shines in the morning sunlight.

The garden offered Greer a solace she had found nowhere else. But as miscarriages have become increasingly common - especially among 30-somethings who have delayed having a family then abruptly discover the realities of infertility — the emotional safety nets have widened.

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Marcia McGinnis (seated) helped form SHARE Atlanta after the death of 3 day-old Seth and two miscarriages. **Jennifer Greer** (left), who had three miscarriages, and **Polly Keen**, who had four miscarriages and two ectopic pregnancies, are group members. Keen, of Dunwoody, helped design the garden.

Miscarriages: Focus on need to heal increases.

Nearly 20 years ago, an Atlanta support group for women with pregnancy losses had a single member. Today, the group draws dozens of couples monthly. And an increasing number of hospitals, doctors and churches more candidly recognize the trauma of miscarriage --- an empathy lacking decades ago.

"Physically, I was fine, but emotionally, you might as well have run me over with a car," said Greer, 34, of Alpharetta. "And people would say stop dwelling and stop worrying about it, so I thought I was totally nutso."

Women who get pregnant in their mid-30s are about twice as likely to miscarry as their younger counterparts.

Pregnancy losses in Georgia for women 30 and older - defined as the baby dying at any time during the nine months, including during delivery -- rose to 3,873 in 2000, almost tripling since 1980, according to the state health department. The majority of those are miscarriages, defined as a pregnancy loss any time up to 20 weeks after conception.

Overall, 983,000 women nationwide reported pregnancy losses in 1996-a 50 percent increase in 20 years. While there's no definitive estimate, scores of miscarriages take place at home every day and go unreported.

Acknowledging loss

"I think for people who miscarry, it really is disenfranchised grief," said Cathy Wing, perinatal loss clinician at Northside Hospital. "For the woman who is pregnant, there is nausea and other signs. The woman has a vested interest. But there is nothing real to the outside world."

As soon as 14 weeks, a pregnant woman can experience labor pains and deliver a premature baby that has no hope of surviving. Many experts believe a baby must live in the womb for at least 23 weeks for any chance of survival.

Acknowledging the increase in miscarriages and the emotional grief they wrought, the hospital in 1994 began offering regular support meetings. Officials also started taking measurements and footprints of stillborn babies.

When Wing, the perinatal loss expert at Northside, started in obstetrical nursing 20 years ago, any time a mother gave birth to a stillborn, "you would take the baby out of the delivery room, and it was like the baby never existed.

"Since then, parents have come back and said, 'You are doing it wrong.' It was like with Vietnam vets that were missing in action --- if you never see the body, you are always left wondering."

Wing said one woman held her stillborn baby overnight in the hospital.

"She held the baby through the night, and it put her in a much better place in healing," she said.

Learning from grief

In the coming months, Grady Memorial Hospital is planning to launch a support group for couples who miscarry. Just two years ago, a Marietta woman created a support group for couples who lost multiple babies in a single pregnancy. Also in Cobb County, the First Baptist Church of Marietta hosts a support group for parents who have suffered a pregnancy loss.

It's so much more than was available to Greer years ago.

For Greer, the healing process included joining SHARE Atlanta. Dozens of women who have suffered pregnancy losses meet every month and comfort one another. No miscarriage is too early to mourn, Greer quickly learned. And it was normal, others told her, to experience the jealousy she felt toward a pregnant cousin and the resentment she felt toward a woman griping about the normal discomforts of childbearing.

The former first-grade teacher felt tired all the time. She had a kidney infection around the time that would have been her due date.

"For people who have not miscarried, there's this feeling by many people that it won't hurt so bad, that you just get pregnant again. No big deal," Greer said.

“We have to spend time with our tragedy, licking our wounds and reaching out and making this baby real ..and to know the love and hope we feel in our children will be there forever. I have five children, I have three in heaven, and all five of them have made me who I am today.” Marcia McGinnis

After her first two miscarriages, Greer had two boys, now 7 and 8 years old. She had another miscarriage before giving birth to a healthy baby girl, who is now 3 years old. Tests revealed that Greer, now a stay-at-home mom, had a progesterone deficiency that contributed to her miscarriages. She took a hormone supplement to correct the problem.

Marcia McGinnis helped formed SHARE Atlanta almost 20 years ago after the death of her 3-day-old baby, Seth. That trauma followed two miscarriages.

Earlier, in the mid-1970s, McGinnis was at the hospital when she suffered her second miscarriage. Laying on a stretcher, she fumbled with a deck of cards until the doctor treated her.

"I remember he said, 'Everything looks great.' And my husband and I were crying, and my husband said, 'How can everything look great if she lost the baby?' " McGinnis remembered.

The nurses took the then-unusual step of letting McGinnis cradle Seth in her arms and photograph him.

"I called my best friend," McGinnis said, "and she told me to take a picture of Seth and I said, 'You are crazy. He is going to die.' And she said, 'I don't care. I want to see that baby.' So we did that and the nurses held Seth in the hospital. That love and tenderness was very important to me."

McGinnis, who now has two sons, wanted other women to have the same opportunity to spend time with their babies.

"We have to spend time with our tragedy," McGinnis said, "licking our wounds and reaching out and making this baby real ... and to know the love and hope we feel in our children will be there forever. I have five children, I have three in heaven, and all five of them have made me who I am today."

Testing, treatment

The miscarriage rate for women in their 20s hovers around 12 percent but nearly doubles for women in their mid- to late 30s, said

Dr. Andrew Toledo of the Reproductive Biology Associates in Atlanta. An increased threat of miscarriage coincides with a greater chance of infertility and fetal abnormalities.

The older the body, the harder time it has processing the genetics, he said.

"What seems to happen is, as a woman's egg gets older, her eggs have a greater difficulty in doing the normal genetic things," said Toledo, a reproductive endocrinologist/infertility specialist.

As many as half of miscarriages happen for unknown reasons. But sometimes, genetic testing reveals the source of the pregnancy loss, potentially offering a clue for treatment. Many doctors now recommend testing after a second miscarriage.

"Even though this is a brutal and emotionally painful event, time does heal slowly, and in the majority of the time, a healthy pregnancy will occur down the road," he said. "But it is truly a loss. The old family doctor would say it is all OK. So, number one, it's important to realize it's a loss and let them feel the pain."

After miscarrying a baby she had tried to conceive for 10 years, then-33-year-old Lisa Smith of Barnesville got pregnant again. That time, she delivered a baby she'd carried 17 weeks. Lisa and her husband, Stephen, named the baby Shannon Elysa, and they held her in the palms of their hands for nearly 30 minutes, watching her heart beating, and saying goodbye.

"She looked like a baby doll. It was very important to us," said Smith, a stay-at-home mom. "I regretted I didn't get to hold my first baby, and I decided, 'I am going to hold this baby.' "

They went on to have a baby girl who is now about 2 1/2 years old, whom they call "our joy and delight and wonderful blessing." Smith is now 38 and worries time is running out to have another child.

"It's been a very difficult road," Smith said. "And you feel like such a failure. From not being able to get pregnant to then finally getting pregnant and miscarrying, you blame yourself."

'See you in heaven'

Back in Sandy Springs, at the Angel memorial, a worker recently pulled weeds on a sunny Wednesday morning and started planting yellow pansies in a brick pedestal. The smooth bricks continually get carved with names of children and inspirational phrases.

"See you in heaven," says one.

"Promise you'll never forget me," says another.

A woman in her 80s recently asked for a brick for her 2-day-old baby who had died. And an older couple who are now grandparents asked --- 40 years after the first pregnancy losses --- for two bricks in memory of eight miscarriages. The two bricks read: "For the brothers and sisters we never knew. Our guardian angels."

Ten years after her first miscarriage, Greer said she no longer mopes over the three losses. Her house is filled with angels, including a candleholder with three angels, "that look like three children playing 'ring around the rosie.' "

She now attaches good memories to her three lost pregnancies. With her first, she remembers her cousin so excited about the pregnancy that she fell to the floor and kicked and screamed in delight. With her second, she remembers giving her husband the news by carrying a bouquet of pink and blue balloons. And with the third, she was afraid to tell her husband, who suspected she'd gone to the doctor to discuss tubal ligation.

She still carries the memories of Jesse, Jamie and Jacob.

"I am not going around mourning them, but I am not going to forget them, either. I feel like I have some peace now," Greer said. The Angel Garden is a "sign to the world that this was not going away."

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about SHARE Atlanta, go to www.shareatlanta.org or call 770-928-9603. SHARE Atlanta services include men and women's grief support groups, a women's grief support group, a pregnancy after loss group, telephone counseling, and a quarterly newsletter. They also hold candlelighting and memorial services.

Northside Hospital sponsors three perinatal loss support groups, including one for parents who have experienced the loss of a child due to miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth or neonatal death; and one for parents who have, of necessity, terminated a wanted pregnancy due to fetal abnormalities or maternal complications. For more information, call 404-851-8177.

H.O.P.E. (Helping Other Parents Endure). Support for parents who have lost a child by stillbirth, miscarriage, catastrophic illness or accident when the child is under 5 years of age. Call 770-424-8326. 7 p.m. first Tuesday of every month; fellowship hall of the First Baptist Church of Marietta, 148 Church St.

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