

Our Journey

By Christine and Ernie Boudreau

Our journey started in October 2002 shortly after we got married. We always knew and talked about having a family and wanted to start right away. We never thought that it wouldn't happen right away for us. So month after month of trying with no success, we decided to seek help. My doctor referred me to Fertility Center of New England. We both underwent a variety of tests and after all the testing with no conclusive results, it was suggested by the doctor that because of our age we should try invitro fertilization. We had no idea how much this would take a toll on my mind & body. We went into it with full force and a positive attitude because we wanted this more than anything. As we went through all the motions, we never told any of our friends and family about our fertility journey. It just seemed easier to keep it to ourselves than to be constantly asked how things were going or where you are in your cycle etc. The first cycle took about two months from start to finish. Having to receive shots every day and going to the clinic three times a week to have blood drawn, plus we were at their mercy. We were ok with this because we were going to get pregnant and have a baby and that's all that really mattered to us. Oh... and I think Ernie actually took pleasure in giving me my shots. And let me tell you going through a cycle means you can never plan ahead, it runs your life. There's no vacations, no weddings, parties etc. But again it was worth all the pain and suffering because we were going to have a baby. And as luck would have it we got pregnant on our first cycle.

We were so extremely excited that we started telling our friends and family when I was only 8 weeks pregnant. Shortly thereafter Ernie went down to Florida to visit his brother John. While I was at home one day I received a wonderful surprise. Ernie had sent me two dozen red roses and a card that read congratulations MOM!!.....Love DAD. This was a major highlight in my life because at that moment I realized I was finally going to be a MOM.

This was turning out to be a perfect pregnancy; I never even had morning sickness or any other symptom that makes us women miserable except for our husbands, they really have no idea!! Before we knew it the 16 week ultrasound was here. That's the day we found out I was having a girl and we had her name already picked out. We named her Dakota Catherine Boudreau named after my mom who passed away in 1991. From that day on we called her by name. She was a huge part of our lives long before she was even born. As the weeks progressed we bonded with Dakota, reading and talking to her. Ernie used to take a flashlight and shine it into my belly just to make Dakota kick. I think it pissed her off but we laughed about it anyways and boy was she a kicker and a mover especially when she heard her daddy's voice. She always seemed to always know when Ernie was in the room and when he whistled into my belly she would kick & roll like crazy. I think that drove her nuts too. I think back and I really enjoyed being pregnant. It was kind of fun.

All was going smoothly well up until 31 ½ weeks and I remember that day like it was yesterday. It was a Sunday afternoon and we were supposed to go to brunch with some friends of ours but they had to cancel. So Ernie and I went to brunch and after we ate we went over to Ernie's parents house, just his father and nephew Erik were there. Erik told me that my belly looked like Pappas, which was the nickname the kids called Ernie's dad and I do remember feeling like my belly was very big and bloated that day. After we had stayed a while we went home and were extremely bored and were just hanging out in our computer room probably shopping. I said to Ernie I am bored "let's have a baby tonight". We laughed and went to relax on the couch. While we were watching Dateline, William Huang from American idol was singing that song "She Bangs-She bangs". Then it happened: all of a sudden it felt like I wet my pants. After rushing to the bathroom to see what was going on I saw blood. I knew that we needed to go to the hospital right away, my water had broken.

As Ernie and I drove to Winchester Hospital we had made some phone calls to our family letting them know what was going on and was reassured that everything would be ok. We were told this happens all

the time and that we would be safe once we got to the hospital. I remember Ernie saying that he wasn't ready for this, but are we ever?? Once we got there they sent us right up to Labor and Delivery. Everything seemed to be happening way too fast. They hooked me up to an ultrasound monitor and told me I was having contractions one to two minutes apart. I felt nothing; I didn't even believe them. Then they performed all sorts of tests to make sure it was amniotic fluid that I was leaking. Shortly thereafter it was confirmed that my water did indeed break. They gave me my first of two steroid injections to help Dakota's lungs mature in the event we had to deliver. Then they gave me magnesium to stop the contractions. For a brief moment we felt like we were out of the woods until they told us that we couldn't stay at Winchester Hospital because if I were to go into labor I couldn't deliver there. They did not have a NICU for babies less than 32 weeks. So the next thing I knew I was on my way to Beth Israel Hospital by emergency ambulance with Ernie in hot pursuit. When we arrived they performed a few more tests and then admitted me. I was told that I was going to be staying there for the duration of my pregnancy. We thought, "Ok I guess I should get comfortable because it looks like I'll be here for a few weeks". We figured no better place to be than in one of the best hospitals in Boston right? The nurses at BI were absolutely amazing and I instantly bonded with them and more importantly, they bonded with Dakota. We felt SAFE!

The doctors were trying to keep me pregnant until I was at least 34 weeks and we trusted everything they said because they were doctors and we weren't!! Boy we were so naïve. We never in our wildest dreams thought that anything like this would ever happen. We just figured, "Ok we are here until we have our baby, no biggie". The doctors did talk to us about having a pre-mature baby and we were prepared for that. We would do whatever they wanted us to do. Everything was in their hands and that made everything feel ok. We were under the best care and we were going to have our baby. So as time slowly passed by I had multiple heart beat and non-stress tests three to four times daily. I don't know why they call them non-stress tests because according to Ernie they caused nothing but stress (on him). All these tests reassured us that everything was a ok. The one thing that made me feel safe was Ernie. He stuck by my side the whole entire time morning, noon and night. Ok it's Wednesday now and we are being sent to another floor for an ultrasound. The nurse wheeled me down to a very quiet and dim lit hallway with barely any people around, it was kinda creepy, The nurse made us comfortable and then just left (weird). Then a doctor whom we've never seen before and don't want ever see again, walks in and starts the ultra sound test on my belly. He was very quiet while performing the ultrasound, until he bluntly says to us that Dakota has a double bubble in her belly; like we should know what that means. As I stated above we've had numerous ultrasounds and this is the first we had heard of it. So we asked the doctor what does that mean and he replies ignorantly that it means that it's a sign of Down's syndrome. Then he gets up and walks out the room and leaves us there by ourselves in complete awe and devastation. Now at that point we were really upset. Ernie wanted to knock him out. Who did this doctor think he was to tell us this devastating news and then get up and leave? Talk about unprofessional, so after we wheeled ourselves back to our room we demanded to speak to Dr. Grable. We wanted him to explain to us what this other doctor was talking about. Another doctor from the NICU came up and explained to us that it was a very common birth defect and that it doesn't necessarily mean Down's Syndrome. He also said to us that everything else looked fine and she had no other signs of Down's Syndrome. Then he explained to us that Dakota would need to go over to Children's Hospital to have minor surgery soon after she was born to fix the bubble. We thought ok we can deal with that; we could think of worse things.

On Wednesday night February 25, 2004 around 9:00 pm, Ernie and I were relaxing watching American Idol and the nurse came in to perform another non stress test. It figures right in the middle of my favorite TV show and once again all was A-ok. The nurse told us around 2:00 in the morning another test needed to be performed. I remember thinking why can't they wait till the morning, everything's fine so I thought. I went to sleep and Ernie went back to snoring (he blamed it on the chair), then life as we knew it would change forever. As scheduled the nurse came in to check Dakota's heartbeat. I was still half asleep and Ernie was snoring loudly beside me. When the nurse quietly asked me where they usually place the monitor to hear her heartbeat I pointed to the area on my belly and mumbled "right here, she always lies on my left side". Like many times before the nurse put the Doppler on my stomach. She moved it to the left a bit then moved it to right side but couldn't hear anything. So she then said to me that she was going to go get another wand because the one she had was not working. Ok I thought "no biggie" and then she comes in again with another Doppler wand. Again she put it where I told her Dakota usually lies but still

we heard nothing. Now I am getting a little nervous and say to her "is everything ok, you are kind of freaking me out here". At this point Ernie hears the commotion and has woken up and ask what is going on. The nurse then says that she was going to go get the ultrasound machine. I thought, "sweet, now I get to see Dakota", which was always a joy for us. Ernie loved to see his Dakota on the ultra sound machine; that's why he never missed any of my appointments. As the nurse wheeled in the machine, a Doctor came in along with her. As this point I started to get a bit nervous, but NEVER thought I would be hearing the words that came out of the doctor's mouth in the upcoming moments. As he put the ultrasound machine on my belly, he placed it right over Dakotas's heart and what came next were words that I never want to hear again in my life, "I am sorry but there is no heart beat". I made him check a second and third time. He had to be wrong; this was not happening. I must be dreaming. The next thing I heard was Ernie screaming "NO" at the top of his lungs, punching the chair as hard as one could and then he just dropped to his knees. To hear that your daughter had just died and to see your husband who was my rock fall apart was more than any woman could handle at one time. We were no longer SAFE!!

Then round two of unthinkable news was delivered, the nurse came in and said to me that we were going down to labor and delivery to deliver Dakota. I thought, "What do you mean I have to deliver her, just take her out of me". The nurse explained to me it was safer to have a vaginal delivery than to do a C-section. So they gave me a shot of pitocin to help induce labor and the nurses began prepping me for labor. Meanwhile Ernie had to make the phone calls telling our families that Dakota had died. This is the phone call that you never imagine making or a call you ever want to receive. My heart breaks to this day because I don't know how Ernie actually did it. I can't imagine having to make those calls especially to his Dad who had lost two of his own children ages three and four in a fire in 1971. The news of Dakota dying had an overwhelming impact on Ernie's Dad because he had to watch his own son go through the pain and suffering of his daughter dying as he did for his other two sons. Ernie's heart broke even more when he saw how hard this was affecting his Dad.

As the nurses wheeled me down to labor and delivery everything felt surreal. This is not supposed to be happening. I had plans and this was not part of them. What am I supposed to do? I wish my mother was here. I wish my mother was alive because she'd have the answer. Our children are not supposed to die before their parents. Our families started to arrive and it was lots of heart wrenching tears and hugs. No one could apprehend why this had happened or even knew what to say. Now that I think back I wish more people had said nothing. As I progressed in my labor our families had to leave the room. It was just Ernie, one nurse and me. It was extremely quiet; not like it should be in a normal delivery room. And again Ernie was right there beside me. He was the best coach ever. Even though we knew the outcome, I have to say we were troopers throughout the delivery. Knowing I had to go through what was supposed to be the joys of childbirth and knowing my Dakota wasn't going to be alive at the end is something that will live with me for the rest of my life. I can say what a lot of women can't, "I gave birth to an angel". On February 26, 2004 at 6:43 am with Ernie by my side I gave birth to my beautiful daughter Dakota Catherine Boudreau. At that moment our lives changed forever. We were in love, it didn't matter that she wasn't alive. We fell in love with her just the same!! After Ernie had cut the cord he and his mom helped the nurses clean her up and weigh her. Dakota was being treated as if she was a happy healthy live little girl. Ernie got her dressed and then we got to hold her, kiss her and through the tears tell her how much I loved her. I did with all my heart. I never loved anything or anyone as much as I loved my Dakota. But at the same time our hearts were in fact completely broken and thought to be unfixable.

Our families came back into the room and they all got to hold Dakota and kiss her. They took pictures of her and with her, which hang on our walls to this day. She was the most beautiful and precious angel anyone had ever seen. Because of the unique situation, we had Dakota baptized right there at the hospital. One thing I can look back at and laugh now is.... picture this, a priest walks in and he is about 80 years old. He had a very nervous way about him and he kept looking around like he forgot something. He then walks into the bathroom, turned on the faucet and got water. He then comes out and baptizes Dakota. Yes, folks, he forgot his holy water so he used bathroom water. He at least he blessed it first. That actually lightened up the mood in the room even for a few minutes. That morning of February 26, 2004, our lives changed forever. I changed forever; I will never be that person I was before Dakota died. She changed me that day in so many ways. She taught me who I really was and how strong I really am. She transformed me into the person I am today. We stayed another night at the hospital and left the next

morning without our precious gift. As we were getting on the elevator, Ernie was paying for parking and then some guy who must have seen him before said to Ernie, "Oh congratulations, you had your baby". Ernie's response was "No, she died". The ride home seemed like it took an eternity but once we got home all our family and friends were there. Coming home without our baby was not the way it was suppose to be. Thank God for our family and friends. They were so great to us even though they couldn't truly understand our loss and tragedy that we were feeling. They stood by us through it all and did their best.

Then came the services. We gave our Dakota one of the best wakes one has ever seen, the line was out the door with friends and family from all over coming in to pay our little angel their respects and to show us love. They helped work on scrapbooks with pictures and letters and cards, and photo frames were done. It was truly amazing; it was as if she had been here forever.

We had a beautiful service for her and laid her to rest like she deserved. Ernie carried her little casket from the hearse to her final resting place and then buried our little girl with his own two hands. She was an angel before she was born and she will always be our angel till the day we meet again. As the Priest said during her ceremony Dakota is "GOLDEN". She came into this world and left this world without sin; words I still hold on to today. The day we buried her it was 70 degrees out but cloudy and at the end of the services I released a balloon. As I let it go the sun came out as bright as can be and the balloon disappeared in an instant. At that moment I knew Dakota was in heaven.

As the weeks went by and people began to show up less and less, my family convinced us to go to a support group meeting. It wasn't my thing but I decided to go. It's not like things could get any worse. My whole family ended up coming with Ernie and I and this was the beginning of my healing. When I first walked in and saw people laughing I wanted to turn around and walk out. I thought how can people be laughing; just smiling makes me feel guilty. As we sat though the meeting and listened to all the stories, I was in awe. I lost Dakota at 32 ½ weeks yet some of these couples went full term. I thought that is awful. Then I thought it really doesn't matter how far along you were, we were all here because we all had lost our babies. The endings to our stories were all the same. It was the beginning and middle that were different. As the days went by I looked forward to my meetings every month because it was a place where I could go and feel safe talking about Dakota and people actually wanted to listen. It was a place where I felt normal about how I was feeling and for people to justify that what I was feeling was completely normal. It's been a long healing process and a long rough road. People just didn't know what to say or do around us. I found myself not going to parties, weddings, or any other gathering. The worst was that saying "you can have other children" but I didn't want other children I wanted Dakota. Little did they know it wasn't that easy for us to just get pregnant. It was a lot of hard work mentally and physically.

May 10th 2004 we met with the doctors to go over Dakota's autopsy results. The doctors tried very hard to explain everything but Dr. Grable summed it up perfectly by saying that Dakota was the "Perfect Storm". She had an e-coli infection throughout her body, double bubble in her stomach and an ectopic anus. He said this was a once in a lifetime situation, that these three things came together as one and her body couldn't handle it. That is what she died from. If she only had one of them she would have been ok, but the three of them together made "the perfect storm". I have to say I found comfort in that. My daughter was perfect and she sure as hell was a storm that turned our lives upside down like a tornado.

When we got the ok from the doctors that we were ready to try again, it was back to the fertility clinic only to find out I had an infection. Once again we had to wait months before we could even start again. To have to wait to try until some doctor tells you it is ok just makes the pain resurface. Once we were clear to try again we got pregnant on our first cycle.

Jump forward seven years; a lot has happened. Ernie and I both went through our grieving together or so we thought. We both had different ways with dealing with our grief but we somehow managed to keep our head straight enough to go forward and have two more beautiful children. Having them did not make the pain go away but it made life a little easier to deal with. This whole chapter in our lives resulted in some ups and downs in our marriage that ended in a separation for almost two years. It was a long two years but through a lot of therapy, communication, and working on our personal grief together, I am

happy to say that my husband is back and we are a family once again. We will always be missing that one person, our daughter Dakota Catherine. The memories and the pain will never cease to exist but it has gotten much less as time goes by. Today as a family we are in a great place and I have advice for other couples that are going through the loss of a child. If you think you are keeping your communication open, then open them even more. Make sure those lines of communication stay open and you both deal with the grief at your own pace. Most importantly make sure you're there for each other. Ernie was and is my rock and he kept me grounded and sane. I never knew who his rock was which was the cause of some of our ups and downs.

This is not a journey we would have asked to travel but it is one that the higher ups had planned for us. One thing I know is that I will never be that person I was before Dakota died because she has made me a better person. Mothers are supposed to teach their children but Dakota taught me that I am stronger than I ever could have imagined. She taught me to never to take the little things for granted and to fight for what you know and love. In losing Dakota, I gained friends that I would've never met in my life. The women of the Hope Group mean the world to me. You've helped us travel this journey that no one should have to travel. Ernie and I wouldn't be where we are today without the love and support of our HOPE family; and this we thank you for from the bottom of our hearts.