

Baby steps: Waterbirth seen as a less painful, less traumatic process

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By Kristie Rearick/Gloucester County Times



EnlargeLori M. Nichols / Gloucester County Times Mallory Taylor, of Alloway, holds her newborn son, Braylen, skin-to-skin at South Jersey Healthcare-Elmer Hospital, April 24, 2012. (Staff Photo)

When Braylen Maurice Taylor came into the world at South Jersey Healthcare Elmer on April 24, he didn't make a sound.

Braylen was born under water.

And when Braylen's grandmother – Robin Taylor, nurse manager at the hospital – pulled him from the warm water and handed him to his proud mother, he didn't wail or scream. He simply stared into his mother's eyes.

"It's this peaceful moment that just makes me cry," said Karen Shields, a certified nurse midwife. "When you bring the baby up [from the water], the baby just looks around. It's not this big shock to come out. It's dark and quiet. It's a moment that's really nice. I love it."

Braylen's mother, Mallory, chose to have a waterbirth.

Waterbirth

Karen Shields first became interested in the idea of a waterbirth when she was in labor with her own son.

"I labored in the tub the whole time and I didn't want to get out to deliver him," she said.

"Once I got out of the tub, I became so much more uncomfortable. That's really the first time it ever occurred to me. I thought, 'Why can't I have my baby in the tub?' " It was a question she took to Barbara Harper, an international waterbirth expert and maternity nurse. Harper has lectured on the subject in 43 countries, including medical schools, nursing schools, midwifery programs and university women's studies departments.

"We met at a conference. I started talking to her about the option of waterbirth, and I took one of her classes to learn how to do a waterbirth," Shields said.

From there, the idea of giving birth in a warm tub of water began to take shape. But there were some obstacles. At Bridgeton Hospital, where Shields delivered babies, it was a difficult option. Women who wanted to try a waterbirth had to rent a tub, Shields said.

"It would cost them hundreds of dollars to rent it," she said. "I did it, but I didn't do it that often." Other women at the hospital would labor in the rooms' bathtubs, but would have to leave the tub to give birth. "I found many women pleading with me to let them stay in the tub. Unfortunately, the tub wasn't large enough for birth, and hospital protocols didn't allow for the option of waterbirth," Shields said.

When South Jersey Healthcare purchased Elmer Hospital in 2003, Shields became excited. Her midwife practice, Gentle Beginnings, was already in Elmer, so why couldn't she deliver babies there? The maternity ward at the hospital had been closed in the '70s, but Shields strongly felt there was a "need for maternity in Elmer."

"They told me, 'If you can find a physician who's willing to come, we'll consider reopening the maternity ward,' " she said.

Soon, she found a physician who wanted to deliver babies there. And she immediately began pushing for a birthing tub to be included on the floor.

A good idea that 'really took off'

South Jersey Healthcare Elmer opened its MaternityCare Center in October 2003. The hospital boasts five LDRP (labor, delivery, recovery, post partum) rooms. Four of the five rooms have whirlpool tubs – and the fifth room has a birthing tub.

"The administration at South Jersey Healthcare was very receptive to my request to offer women the choice of waterbirth," Shields said. "With the opening of Elmer's maternity ward

in the fall of 2003 and its 'waterbirth room' – with a tub designed especially for birth – I've been able to offer low-risk women the choice of waterbirth."

Waterbirth started to gain momentum in the U.S. about 25 years ago with the help of Harper. Her personal experience with giving birth underwater prompted her to create Waterbirth International with a goal to "make waterbirth an available option for all women." French physician Michel Odent was one of the first public advocates of waterbirth. After his 100th waterbirth, Odent published an article in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, which reported his conclusions. In his article, "Birth Underwater," he said there were "no risks attached to labor or birth underwater."

Elmer is the only hospital in the area to offer waterbirth as an option. No hospitals in Philadelphia offer it, and the only other hospital in New Jersey that has a birthing tub is in Hackettstown – "near New York," Shields said.

"It's a pretty big deal," she said. At Elmer, the idea "really took off."

Shields said she delivers about 50 babies under water each year.

During a waterbirth the mother steps into a deep tub of warm water as she enters the final stages of active labor. "You can see the woman visibly relax into the water as she reclines in the tub, fully immersing her belly," Shields said. "Most times, the ability to relax in water assists the woman to progress to full dilation."

Mallory's story

As she stepped into the tub of warm water, the lights were dim, the room was quiet, and her support people surrounded her. A CD was playing her favorite, soft music.

"I thought it would be more relaxing," said Mallory, of Alloway Township.

And it was.

Mallory's mom, Robin, is the nurse manager at the hospital in Elmer. Good friends with Shields – Mallory's midwife – she mentioned the idea of a waterbirth to her daughter when she first became pregnant.

"She said, 'OK, I'll do that.' Mallory also did HypnoBirthing to ease her pain," Robin recalled.

"She never took anything for the pain, and there wasn't a peep out of her the whole time."

Mallory was in labor for 10 hours. She was in the birthing tub for only 10 minutes. "Karen checked her and she broke her water. And then Mallory said she felt like pushing," Robin said. So into the tub she went.

"They filled the tub up with warm water, and I put my head on a beach ball," Mallory said.

"I just thought being in the water would be so much better than sitting on a bed."

Braylen must've thought so, too. His mom only pushed for 10 minutes – it's not unusual for a woman to push for over an hour, Robin said – and out he came, under water. The baby doesn't stay under the water for long, Shields said, usually about five to 10 seconds, just long enough "to unfold," to open his eyes and spread his arms a little, and then, "I bring them up."

"It's good for the baby and it's so good for the mom. It's so relaxing. It really helps everybody ... it's so peaceful and gentle," Shields said.

It was definitely a good experience, said Robin, first-time grandmother to newborn Braylen.

"My God. It was phenomenal," she said. And new mom Mallory agreed.

"I would definitely do it again," Mallory said. "For me, it was just a more soothing,

Known benefits of laboring in water and waterbirth

- Facilitates mobility and enables the mother to assume any position which is comfortable for labor and birth
- Speeds up labor
- Reduces blood pressure
- Gives mother more feeling of control
- Provides significant pain relief
- Promotes relaxation
- Conserves the mother's energy
- Reduces the need for drugs and intervention
- Gives mother a private protected space
- Reduces perineal trauma and eliminates episiotomies
- Reduces cesarean rates
- Is highly rated by mothers – who typically state they would consider giving birth in water again
- Is highly rated by experienced providers
- Encourages an easier birth for mother and a gentler welcome for baby

– from Guidelines for a Safe Water Birth, Barbara Harper, RN, 2005 Waterbirth

Internationalwww.waterbirth.org