AIMS For a better birth...

A stillbirth legacy

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Nicky Heppenstall shares why she became a volunteer remembrance photographer

The moment you're told your baby has died, that they're stillborn, you are shocked and numb, there are so many unanswered questions rushing through your mind, and the last thing you think about is photographs. But this is probably the most important photo opportunity ever: a lifetime's worth of chances to capture all those milestones is gone in the blink of an eye.

In April 2001, I lost a stillborn daughter, Kim. After three days I was able to take some photographs, but I was upset, still in shock; it was the best I could do: they're not great. But that was then.

In 2009, I came across an American website and was moved to tears as I watched a video of stunningly beautiful and sensitive images that bereaved parents could treasure forever, that could be framed and on display without fear of causing fright. The website belonged to a US based charity offering remembrance portraiture free of charge.

At that time I was a keen amateur photographer, tentatively exploring taking my passion further, but I knew immediately that I wanted and needed to be able to provide that service to bereaved parents. Discovering there was such a charity out there was a major catalyst in the decision to turn professional and so I became a Baby Remembrance Photographer.



The first family contacted me after their unborn baby was diagnosed with Trisomy 13 (Patau's Syndrome); unlikely to be born alive, or to live long if she survived her birth, her parents wanted me to photograph her. I had the chance to meet with this young mum in advance and talk at length about what was likely to happen, and about my own experience of loss. Baby Imogen was born on a Tuesday some months later, alive. I photographed her with her parents and brother on the Thursday at the hospice

where they were being looked after for the few days that Imogen survived. She died in her mother's arms in the small hours of Sunday and I returned to the hospice on Sunday afternoon to photograph her without her oxygen tube, as if peacefully sleeping. Meeting a family in advance is not the norm, but does happen from time to time when a diagnosis means a loss is inevitable. It is a privilege to be a part of this family's journey through grief, and to provide a tangible link to the precious few days that Imogen was with them.

I met Jonah's family a few days after he'd been stillborn, and photographed him with his parents and grandparents, an older sibling and his aunt. The midwife had made them aware of my own loss and they commented how this must be difficult for me to do, but I think it's because of my own loss that I am able to do this at all. I have travelled my journey, I am comfortable with my grief, and I have found that whilst I can feel empathy for their loss, I am able to softly and gently go about capturing images that will bring much greater comfort than any word or gesture of mine could possibly do.



Following on from my experience of volunteering for the US charity, myself and seven others with the same passion co-founded a dedicated UK Baby Remembrance Photography charity called 'Remember My Baby', which was formed on 18 August 2014.

Remember My Baby (RMB) coverage within the UK is steadily growing. It is our aim to have an official RMB Volunteer Photographer linked with all hospitals and birth centres across the UK, but how can we tell people about this amazing service at such a delicate and painful time? More importantly, how can we keep it from them?



There is such a small window of opportunity; there is only one chance, to capture images that will provide comfort for a lifetime. Every parent should have the choice. Midwives are the best-placed people to make parents aware of this service - as the frontline carers they are on hand as parents are losing their baby. If there is an official RMB Volunteer Photographer local enough to the unit, staff can check if they are available before showing parents a leaflet that explains exactly what we do. A phone call to check our availability, and a second one to request we attend if the family wish it, are all that's required; the rest is up to us.

Families receive a disc/USB which includes high resolution images suitable for printing, low-resolution images for smart phones or sharing via email, and some volunteers also create slideshows of their images in formats suitable for smart phones and for viewing on a laptop or PC. This is all provided free of charge within four to six weeks.



All RMB volunteers are skilled photographers; applicants are assessed to ensure a high standard. They are fully insured and independent from the hospitals and birth centres they visit. We are truly grateful to those who help us to provide this service for bereaved parents. More and more Bereavement Midwives and managers are hearing about us and getting in touch to see how the service works and requesting that we set it up in their hospital. Our co-founders regularly meet with and present to Bereavement Teams and the feedback is incredibly positive.

Since August last year we have gained registered charity status with the Charity Commission in England

and Wales, and also with the Scottish Charity Regulator; we have recruited over 90 volunteers and have carried out more than 60 sessions in more than two dozen hospitals; we have also appeared on BBC2's Jeremy Vine show, talking about stillbirth. In less than a year we have achieved a great deal. Being part of Remember My Baby is the silver lining in my stillbirth cloud, Kim's legacy.



To find out more about RMB's Remembrance

Photography Service please visit www.remembermybaby.org.uk. The RMB Find a Photographer Directory appears on the left side of our website, simply type in your postcode to see your nearest Volunteer Photographer's contact details. In the event that we don't yet have a volunteer in your area, please email info@remembermybaby.org.uk or call 07837 739855 as we may have a volunteer willing to travel to your location - some of our volunteers literally go the extra mile.

Nicky Heppenstall

Nicky is a parent, a bereaved parent, a photographer, and co-founder and trustee of Remember My Baby. She has been volunteering as a Baby Remembrance Photographer since 2010 and believes the images she provides can make a real difference to the families who have lost a lifetime of capturing memories in photographs.