

When People Ask Me How Many Children I Have, I Don't Know What to Say

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Six years ago, Shannon Klingman was thrilled by a surprise pregnancy. Already mom to Bennett, then 12, Julia, 5, and Jonah, 4, she had been at home in Minnesota since leaving her medical practice in 2009. She also crafted handmade soaps for a small business she started with her dad. “There was something magical about our life at that time,” says Shannon. “We spent our days playing with the kids, baking and making lavish dinners. Everything was a science project, and I was really enjoying feathering my nest.”

Shannon and her husband, Evan Griffiths, also an obstetrician, decided to have genetic testing done. But when Evan came home with the results, “I knew by the look on his face that something was wrong,” says Shannon. “He told me the baby was a girl, and that she had Down syndrome.” Such news would have shattered many parents — but not Shannon. “I’d always been drawn to children with special needs,” she says. At 9, she regularly helped out a neighborhood mom who had a 5-year-old son with Down syndrome, and as a teen she worked with a Girl Scout troop made up of kids with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and other emotional and physical special needs. They embraced their future and named their baby-to-be Amy Jane.



Far left: Shannon with Amy in the hospital. "We loved her from the moment we knew we were carrying her."
Far right: Mary, Shannon's youngest daughter.

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The couple decided to build a new home in a rural area with enough space for Shannon’s parents. “We knew we would need the help, and we wanted to create a haven where we could control Amy’s environment,” says Shannon. “We couldn’t wait to raise her.”

Yet at every visit, Shannon’s doctors asked her if she wanted to terminate. “They wanted to make sure I knew my rights,” says Shannon. “But I had been clear that I wanted to keep this baby.” Her pregnancy progressed smoothly until her 36-week visit, when tests suggested that the placenta wasn’t functioning the way it should. “I said I wanted to deliver as soon as possible,” says Shannon, who also wanted testing to see if the baby could tolerate the contractions of labor. But she was told they should wait to offset risks associated with prematurity. “I felt like a cat throwing punches in a pillowcase,” says Shannon. “No one listened to me.”

A week later, on a bright October day, Shannon started to feel contractions. She and Evan used their own monitor at home to track Amy's heartbeat. "With each contraction, her heart rate dropped — a sign that she was struggling, just as Shannon had feared," says Evan. Frantic, he rushed Shannon to the nearest hospital — the one where he practiced — knowing they had to deliver the baby quickly by cesarean section.

Shannon was put under anesthesia, and Evan performed the surgery with another doctor. When Amy was born, he realized at once that she was having trouble breathing and watched helplessly as the neonatal team tried to resuscitate her.

"It was surreal. I could see Amy getting dusky," says Evan. "I remember praying, 'Please let her be OK.'"

By the time Shannon woke up in the recovery room half an hour later, Amy seemed to be turning a corner. "She was so round and chubby. She looked perfect," says Shannon. Doctors transported Amy to Children's Hospital in Minneapolis, with Shannon following by ambulance. Meanwhile, Bennett, Julia and Jonah stayed with their grandparents, baking Amy a birthday cake and drawing pictures of themselves pushing her in a stroller.

But the next morning, Amy began seizing. Doctors resuscitated her multiple times while she was intubated and on life support. "We knew then that she wasn't going to recover," says Shannon. She and Evan agreed to discontinue life support, and Shannon took her baby girl in her arms for the first and last time. "I held her for only 30 minutes before she died," says Shannon.



Mary on her first birthday. Today at 3, she knows she has a sister in heaven. "We just can't see her," says Shannon.

After Amy passed, Shannon cradled her, soaking up her scent, her presence, her spirit. "And then ultimately I had to lay her down and walk away. I had other children who needed me," she says. Grief-stricken, Evan and Shannon broke the terrible news to their family. They all slept together for three nights before Shannon and Evan coaxed the children back to their own beds.

By early November, ground had broken for construction of the new house. But without Amy, the family didn't need the extra space — or the rural setting. They had been building the house for her. "We thought about abandoning our plans, but we still had to decide what to do with Amy," says Shannon. "I couldn't stand the thought of burying her in a cemetery."

Then one morning Evan was visiting the property when he noticed the sun shining through two beautiful oak trees that came together in an archway with a little grove between them. He and Shannon decided Amy should be laid to rest there. They got the permits to dedicate the grove area as a private cemetery, and on May 24, 2014, they gathered the two-foot pearlized coffin that held their daughter and buried her at home.

After Amy died, Shannon avoided family and friends and was even reluctant to go to the supermarket. “I felt tremendous grief and guilt, like I’d backed over my own child with a car,” says Shannon. “I was a mom and an obstetrician. I knew something was wrong...I felt like I hadn’t fought hard enough for her.”



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She sleepwalked through her days for over a year, the emotional pain turning her inside out: “When you lose a child, it feels like you have one foot in the afterlife. I didn’t want to die. But I felt like I didn’t have the strength to keep living.”

One day, Jonah tried to comfort his mom. “I know you’re sad about Amy. I wish she was here too,” he said. “But the world is hard, and when I get sad, I think, *She’s in a better place.*”

“It was so angelic and pure,” Shannon says. “It helped me realize they were healing without me. It was as if Amy’s loss triggered a chemical change in me — there was me before Amy and me after Amy, and the two were radically different. I felt like my children wouldn’t have a memory of me before Amy — that made me sad.”

By New Year’s Day 2015, Shannon started having moments when she felt lighter, even happier. On January 24, she set up a table to sell her homemade soaps at a local co-op event, and there she reconnected with her children’s teachers, fellow churchgoers and old friends. “I heard myself laugh and thought, *I’m still here,*” says Shannon. “For the first time since we lost Amy, I felt like I was seeing in color again, like this community was welcoming me back to the land of the living.”




Happy together: Shannon's children, Mary, Bennett, Jonah, and Julia.

Later that day, Shannon told Evan how she was feeling — and was surprised when he said he had something to tell her too. At the hospital earlier in the day, a 19-year-old woman, Michelle,* had arrived in labor. Evan wasn’t on call for walk-in patients that day, but he agreed to deliver her baby.

When she confided that she wanted to place the baby for adoption, another doctor there suggested that maybe Evan and Shannon should adopt the infant — and Evan felt as if lightning had struck. “All this happened on the same day Shannon began to feel like she was seeing in color again,” he says. “I don’t think that was a coincidence.”

As soon as Shannon heard about the baby, she raced to the hospital. And when Michelle met Shannon, she handed her the baby's other parent bracelet. "There was a sort of glow in the room," says Shannon. "I was incredibly humbled and grateful." When Evan and Shannon went to see the baby in the nursery, every nurse in the room was in tears — many of them had been there the night Amy was born.



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“It felt like this baby was heaven-sent,” says Shannon. “That’s when I began to forgive myself for Amy’s death. I knew God wouldn’t have handed me this beautiful girl if I wasn’t a good mother.” They named the baby Mary Hope, a nod to their Christian faith and the idea that hope and life can spring from loss.

Shannon stayed with Mary while Evan picked up the children and brought them back to the hospital to meet their new sister. “I told the children the most important thing for Mary was skin-to-skin contact,” says Shannon. “Julia immediately took off her tank top, and I laid Mary right on her chest” as they all basked in the

miraculous birth...and rebirth.

Today, Mary is an active, smart 3-year-old who has served as a healing balm for the whole family. And Shannon started a new company, Lumē, selling natural deodorant. But Amy is far from forgotten, and this Christmas, as on the others since Amy's death, the children will hang a new ornament on the tree for her. "It's like she's a wise soul guiding us in some way, cheering us on during times of triumph and buoying us up during times of trouble," says Shannon. "I'm honored to be her mother."

**Name has been changed.*

Inspired by Shannon's story? Find more amazing real-life stories (or maybe share your own) at *One Tough Muther*, a podcast hosted by journalist Karen Finocchio.

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