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When dreams are shattered: Black mothers are more likely to suffer the death of an infant

Hospitals offer memory boxes when infants die. Black women get them more often.

All Azadrian Collier has of her two babies who died too soon fits inside a heart-shaped cardboard box.

Two tiny knitted caps. Two batches of glossy photographs taken by the hospital of her baby girl and baby boy. Two hospital bracelets with their names printed on plastic. Two paper tape measures that show the girl was 8.7 inches long, and the boy 9.5 inches.

All her life Collier has heard the dirge about infant deaths in the black community. Her best friend in high school lost her twins. Her sister-in-law lost her baby girl after three months. And every time she went back to her old neighborhood in Apopka, there was talk about another black mother whose baby died.

She never thought it would happen to her. Certainly not twice.

"It's like your whole world crumbles," said Collier, 26, of Ocoee.

A CDC report released Wednesday shows the rate of infant deaths nationwide has leveled off after a nearly decade-long decline. However, black infants continue to die at disproportionately high rates. Blacks are more than twice as likely to die as infants than white babies. In Florida, the black infant mortality rate was 12.36 in 2005, compared to 5.63 for white babies, according to the report.

Locally, the racial disparities are just as pronounced. State health department figures show that from 2000 to 2006, the number of black-infant deaths in Orange County increased from 41 to 61 a year. In 2000, a black baby died every 11 days. In 2006, it was every six days.

On April 3, 2007, that baby's name was Antonisha Massey -- Collier's prematurely born daughter. On July 4, 2008, it was Antwan Massey -- Collier's stillborn son.

The CDC report cited congenital malformations as the leading cause of infant deaths in 2005.

Disorders related to short gestation and low birth weight was second, followed by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Collier lost her second baby after she lost her job in the prison library of the Central Florida Reception Center. Without a paycheck or health coverage, she stopped going to her doctor. She tried to do what the doctor had suggested: Get lots of rest; stay off her feet; eat fruits and vegetables; don't smoke, drink or use drugs. Still, Antwan arrived three months early.

Watching her health

"I don't think it was my fault. I don't think I did anything wrong," she said.

"Some of us don't do what we're supposed to, and some of us do."

She sees a friend who is six months pregnant and using drugs, and feels the resentment rise inside her. Collier did everything she was told to do and lost her babies. This woman is doing everything the doctors say contributes to the plague of black-infant deaths, and she doesn't even care.

"I'm pretty sure she knows the consequences and what the outcome might be," Collier said.

"But she still does it."

Collier thinks back to the day she lost her daughter.

Even as Antonisha was dying in her arms, Collier was counting her fingers, counting her toes and thinking about how much the baby looked like her father. In her bed at Florida Hospital South, Collier was filling up with a new mother's love for her first child even as she was grieving the infant's impending death.

"You have to sit there and wait it out with your child in your arms," she said. "You have to prepare yourself for what's going to happen."

Thirty minutes after her premature birth, Antonisha stopped breathing.

Collier held the body in her arms for a few minutes and then handed it to the nurse.

She couldn't afford a funeral, so she signed over the body to the hospital.

"The emotional part doesn't kick in until you've delivered this child and you're in this room by yourself. You see the other mothers with their children, and it's just you in there," she said.

The hospital gave her a folder with Antonisha's vital statistics: 7.6 ounces, 22 centimeters long. Time of death: 6:52 p.m. At the bottom of the page are Antonisha's black-ink footprints, as small as a doll's.

'Ache of Emptiness'

Printed on the front of the folder are the words that are the mantra for infant mortality: "The Ache of Emptiness: When Dreams are Shattered."

Inside Azadrian Collier, wedged between the hurt and the sadness, there is a shriek that wants to come out but can't.

"Some days you just want to scream," she said.

"Sometimes I wish I could be in a clear field and scream and just let it out and walk away from it."

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