

## A daughter is born

When a baby is a week or two past her due date, things can get a little crazy.

“We’re going to have to induce labor. Pick a date,” Dr. Wyatt told me one day.

Really? I get to pick my own daughter’s birthday?

How about 6/7/11? Those numbers just kind of rolled off the tongue.

In a way, it was nice to take the mystery out of when we were going to arrive at Cedars-Sinai. It made the whole thing seem a little less frantic and the birth became more like a scheduled event. When we got there, I had the car seat with me. I was ready—at least, I thought I was.

The whole thing started like clockwork. When we got up to the maternity ward, the nurses rolled Joleatha into the big fancy delivery room and just casually started the procedures to induce labor. They were all set to give her the epidural—right on cue—just before all the labor pain was “scheduled.”

The biggest pain might have been Joleatha’s “friend” who had shown up at the hospital uninvited. Joleatha didn’t even particularly like this woman who was horning her way into the delivery room. We had already decided it was just going to be the two of us, but there she was—this woman was actually crashing my daughter’s birth. It was pretty weird.

After the doctor induced labor, the baby was still being kind of stubborn. She wasn’t coming out of there very easily and it started to get a little scary. As Joleatha would try to push, the baby’s heart rate would increase. They had to begin monitoring her heartbeat to make sure everything was okay. I was feeling a little nervous inside, but I couldn’t show it. I didn’t want Joleatha to start panicking.

It was amazing to watch Dr. Wyatt stay so cool through all of this stress.

“Don’t worry,” he would say calmly. “You’ve got time.”

He was a good doctor, but he was so mellow—even as I was kind of freaking out.

“Push, push, push,” I would say, taking my mind off of my own worries.

Then, it happened. It was so amazing.

When my little beautiful baby finally came into the world, all I could see was this little pale thing smiling up at me. I don’t remember any crying. I guess it was a happy day for everybody. It certainly was for me. Because the birth had been a little rough, the nurses quickly took my little girl to an incubator just to be safe.

“Where’s my baby? Where’s my baby?” Joleatha asked a little anxiously.

I could barely find the words to say anything. I was in awe by the whole thing.

“She’s fine,” the nurses assured the new mother.

After the staff had cleaned up the baby, they brought her over to me. I didn't really know what to do. But as I held my little girl in my arms for the very first time, it was a pretty emotional experience. I could feel my eyes starting to well up a little bit, but I managed to fight back the tears.

"I'm not gonna cry," I told myself.

The rest of the day is really kind of a blur. I took a bunch of pictures, of course, but something happened to my phone and I lost all of them—the "cloud" was a little more primitive back then. Joleatha has some pictures of that day too, but she won't share them with me.

We named our daughter Lauren, mostly because we both thought it was a nice name. It didn't have any particular significance. We just wanted something that wouldn't identify or limit our daughter by race. It was a name that might help to give her a fair chance in life. Lauren's middle name was Victoria because Joleatha wanted something classic. Go figure.

One of my earliest memories of little Lauren is my baby trying to take a bite out of my big ol' Moss nose. (Everyone in our family has a huge one.) Lauren and I were lying on the floor staring at each other. It was pretty hilarious. I was laughing hard as my fascinated little girl crawled over to me and tried to take a bite out of her dad's nose. Joleatha took a bunch of pictures of the whole thing, but I haven't seen any of them in years. All I have are the precious memories.

I loved being a father during those early years, but even then I could never truly enjoy it. I was incapable of living in the moment because I was always worried about something. No one in my life has ever made me feel safe enough to simply relax and take a breath. I have literally worked ever since I was a kid and I have never had the feeling of anyone truly having my back, emotionally or otherwise.

After Lauren was born, I would come home from work happy to see her, of course, but I was also emotionally and physically exhausted. When I walked in the door, I would need to just sit down in my chair for about a half-hour, trying to decompress from yet another hectic day on the job. Joleatha didn't understand this at all. She always thought I was just being lazy.

"Aren't you gonna get Lauren?" she would ask, putting the pressure on me.

"Yeah, just give me a minute."

At the time, my work schedule was crazy. I was working 12 to 16 hours a day in rotating shifts that were all over the place. As a first-responder for an oil refinery's in-house fire department, I had to sometimes work evenings, which meant I would leave home at 4 p.m. We were also really short-staffed at the time, so I would get called in a lot. I missed many special moments with my daughter because of that. Joleatha resented me for all of this, but there was nothing I could do about it. It was always stressful at work—and at home.

Even during the worst of it, I would always make it a point to give Lauren a bath when I got home. It was my way of spending quality time and bonding with my baby girl. I also didn't mind getting up to take care of her in the middle of the night, and I had no problem at all changing diapers. I didn't

sleep much anyway. This late-night shift was a tradeoff in my mind because it allowed Joleatha to sleep through the night, but she never saw it that way. She was always finding ways to pick on me. I just wasn't a good father, as far as she was concerned.

Still, I must have done something right. Lauren's first word was "dad." I think it might be because I would always talk to her—even when she was in Joleatha's belly.

"Hey, what are you doing in there?" I would ask, as I poked that tummy like a watermelon.

Lauren would always respond with a little kick to the outside world.

We were very close in those early years when she was a baby and a toddler.

My, how times have changed. As I write this, Lauren is 10 years old. I have not seen her in nearly two years. This is not by my choice, of course. In fact, it is in clear violation of a court order. To say the least, Joleatha—or Jay as I call her—and I are no longer together. But truthfully, that's the good news.

My last visits with Lauren were so gut-wrenchingly hurtful that I feel I barely know my little girl anymore. The lovely child who once adoringly followed me around everywhere now parrots whatever hurtful scorn her mother hands her. In the decade since Lauren's birth, I've lost everything—my home, my financial security, my physical and mental health, and most important, my daughter's love. After my years in the courtroom, I have literally nothing to show for it.

One of the ironies is that almost everybody knows Jay is an unstable manipulator. Her family and friends know it. My family knows it. Just about everyone who knows her understands what this woman is all about—everyone except my daughter and the people who I really needed to understand, the judges in California's family and child-support courts.

From the very beginning, I tried to shield Lauren from the fact that the two of us were even going to court, but Jay took the opposite route, never missing an opportunity to turn my daughter against me while burdening a small child with a kind of ugliness that she didn't deserve or understand. I told Lauren that she could always come to me or her mother to talk about anything. What I didn't know is what Jay was saying at the same time. Slowly, but surely, I would get reports from Lauren about what was going on over at her mom's house. It was infuriating.

"You can talk to me," Jay would apparently tell my daughter. "Your dad has anger issues. You are scared of your dad, right?"

Jay would plant these crazy ideas in Lauren's head, essentially brainwashing her and completely turning her against her own father with lies that were based on absolutely nothing.

Although I have grown increasingly weary and cynical about my prospects for righting these wrongs in a court of law, I am hopeful that someday—somehow—I will regain the love of my only child. In the meantime, I hope I can give others who have suffered the same pains of parental alienation an idea of the uphill battle they can expect if they fight for their children. From day one of our court battles,

Jay has thumbed her nose at almost every order handed her with impunity—including a crucial demand that Lauren enter therapy. Instead, I have been the one to pay the price again and again—in every sense, financially, mentally and emotionally.

Having sold my home to pay off my six-figure legal bills, I am a man in my forties living in my mother's house. I continue my nonstop shift work to keep my head above water while also battling my own depression and anxiety. Meanwhile, my physical health has also deteriorated. I have uncontrolled high blood pressure. I'm on medication for that, as well as for my anxiety.

The worst letdown: As much as I would love for my daughter to live with me, I am no longer in any position to offer her a stable home—even if she wanted to be with me. I feel like a failure.

Frankly, the court system can be particularly unfair to African American men due to a tired stereotype—the black deadbeat dad who doesn't take care of his kids. Jay's attorneys would often tiptoe around it, but they always liked to imply that I wasn't supportive financially, even as I often paid far more than my required child support and spent upwards of \$100,000 on court expenses, including Jay's legal bills because I was the parent with the higher income. That was still the case even when my attorney successfully proved fault on Jay's part.

Ironically, one of our main judges was black. I would like to think that he would have seen through all the deceit on the other side if he had actually taken the time to talk to me. Instead, family court is often just a rush through legal filings and quick judgments with little time for complete and fair testimony or an opportunity to fully address claims made by the other side. When my lawyer tried to raise the issue of "parental alienation," the judge blew it off. The courts just don't get it.

Most tragically, the whole process has caused significant suffering for Lauren, who I no longer even recognize. Simply and sadly, my daughter is very messed up. In recent years, she has angrily said so many hurtful things to me that were not even remotely true. I once put my cellphone on speaker just to help my attorney understand the kind of emotional abuse Lauren was suffering.

"Oh my god, she sounds like a mini version of her mother," my attorney said.

"That's true. I don't know who that is, but that's not my daughter," I answered. "My daughter has never spoken to me that way."

That's simply the way Lauren is now, and it breaks my heart.

I video-recorded one of my last interactions with my daughter. It's awful to watch.

"I know you're a liar because my mom told me you're a liar!" she says at one point.

The odd thing about parental alienation is that the courts seldom take the side of the wronged parent while somehow perceiving the actual perpetrator as the victim. It is a vicious cycle where up is down and right is wrong. The judges don't understand.

Even as I question the worth of my expensive legal battles, I carry one aspiration. I truly hope that Lauren will one day come to understand her father's love and how hard I fought to give her the peaceful and loving childhood she deserves. For now, I can only dedicate this book to her.

I will always love you, Lauren.