

the biggest loss

Tara Poole spoke with Jeda Symonds-Poynton, a former contestant on Australia's *The Biggest Loser*, about her crushing experience of stillbirth and her slow but steady emotional recovery

to talk to Jeda Symonds-Poynton is to talk to an endearingly open young woman. She smiles easily, laughs at

her own jokes and constantly refers to her two young daughters, Liana and Emalee. But this effervescent mother from Sydney's west has a bigger tale to tell.

Jeda stole hearts in early 2009 when, as a participant on *The Biggest Loser*, she declared publicly that as a young mum she'd delivered her second daughter, Kayla, stillborn on December 20 2006. It was on this day that her life, and the lives of her family and friends, changed forever.

'To me, that was the most important moment of appearing on *The Biggest Loser*,' explains Jeda, remembering the day she announced to the cameras her daughter's death. 'The day Kayla was born a couple of years earlier, I had held her in my arms and whispered to her that the world would know of her. I had no idea how I would make that happen, I just knew that I would. Going on the show and speaking about her means many more people now know that babies can, and do, die.'

Kayla was born at full term after a pregnancy with no complications. Jeda and her husband, Anthony, already had a daughter, Liana, who was looking forward to being a big sister. Information about Kayla's impending arrival had been openly shared with their firstborn, and everyone in the family eagerly prepared for the new arrival.

Jeda knew nothing about stillbirth and the possibility that her baby might be in danger, and had no idea that stillbirth could occur in a country with advanced healthcare services.

'I didn't know babies could die,' says Jeda. 'Sure, I realised that babies could be born with illnesses, but I had no clue they could die inside me! No-one told me that,' she says.

Stillbirth is the death of a baby in the womb of

the mother, and can occur at any time from the 20th week right up to birth. In Australia today around 2,000 babies every year are stillborn, with an average of six delivered stillborn every day. As in Kayla's case, many die without explanation, leaving families rocked to the core and with a perpetual feeling of guilt and blame.

'When you are pregnant, people ask you what gender you want,' says Jeda quietly. 'The standard response is, "Oh, I don't care. I only want it to be healthy." But I now say, "I don't care. I just want a breathing baby. I want a healthy, breathing baby."'

Although Jeda's pregnancy had been without any issues, Kayla was Jeda's "big baby".

'Oh, I was massive!' laughs Jeda, holding up her hands in disbelief. 'I had a great and perfectly normal pregnancy; I was just a lot bigger than usual. I got your typical morning sickness and then it was plain sailing after that. But at 35 weeks Kayla was practically full-term in size and I could hardly move. All that I could think was, *Please come out now.*'

Kayla was overdue by four days and Jeda's blood pressure was checked, with all results coming back normal. When Jeda went into labour, everything progressed according to plan.

Arriving at the hospital, the nurses attached monitoring equipment to keep track of the baby's heart rate during the birth, but no heartbeat could be detected. Thinking the equipment was faulty, hospital staff sourced new equipment, however even then the heartbeat remained elusive.

Flurried conversations and a summoning of the doctor didn't assuage Jeda's concerns.

'This went on for a few hours and I was aware that it was significant, but it was all a bit weird. I think I got more information from the look on the doctor's face. All this time I could see the ultrasound scanner and I knew there was meant

to be a heartbeat line on it, but there wasn't. Right there in front of me I could see her lifeless body on the screen,' she explains.

After that Jeda noted that the mood of the room completely changed. 'Because this went on over a period of time, we were telling friends and family everything as we found out any new information. We were all hoping we would hear good news; that somehow we'd been mistaken, but deep down we knew she had gone.'

The impact of Kayla's passing was sudden and deep, with Jeda not immediately realising that the life of her daughter, Liana, as well as the rest of her family, was to be shaped massively by the loss.

'That day Liana didn't just lose a sister, she lost a mummy,' explains Jeda. 'I went into a dark place and the only reason I got up out of bed in the morning was because Liana needed me.'

Jeda was haunted by sensations of guilt, wondering if there had been something she should have done, or could have done, differently. She turned over the pregnancy in her mind, mentally reviewing every appointment with doctors, trying to discover what had happened and, more importantly, why.

Unfortunately, in Jeda's case, Kayla's death was classified as "unexplained". A significant proportion of stillbirths in Australia are termed unexplained, meaning that families either have not opted for an autopsy or else there is no known medical reason for the death. This lack of information and knowledge about why babies die still makes Jeda shake her head in disbelief.

'It does get easier over time,' she says, 'but in the beginning I thought, *I will never be OK.* I would smile, but it wasn't real. My dad still cries about it today. It's deeply affected him. My mum is strong but even she cries when she sees us sobbing.'

After Kayla's death, Jeda retreated into herself,



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wherever there's a baby

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The journey of dealing with the loss of Kayla was eased with the arrival of baby Emalee...

and her relationship with Anthony suffered. They clung onto each other, trying to make it all OK, but something had been lost.

Jeda fell pregnant again. But where her pregnancy with Kayla had been joyous and uplifting, this pregnancy was full of fear and trepidation. 'I was afraid of falling pregnant, I was scared it, stillbirth, would happen again,' confides Jeda. 'Anthony was distant. With Kayla and Liana's pregnancies he would get down close and talk to my belly. He would bond with them early, getting to know them. But with my third pregnancy he just watched my stomach grow.

'We did talk about it because we spent nine months feeling terrified. I could tell he wasn't connecting, and I had to ask him for support, to be more positive. We just kept telling our baby to hang in there. All we could do was hope.'

Liana was also struggling with the loss of her much wanted baby sister. The three-year-old would tell strangers that she already had a baby sister who lived in heaven, and she repeatedly asked Jeda if she could see the photos of little Kayla, taken minutes after she was born.

'How can Kayla be dead if she's in this picture, Mummy?' Jeda remembers her little girl asking.

Baby Emalee Hope was born on January 25 2008, healthy, happy and loud. Jeda remembers her arrival with a sense of relief and joy. 'Emalee really helped me,' says Jeda. 'She is my hero. When people say to me, "Everything happens for a reason," I can only respond by saying, "Nothing good comes from a baby dying." But then I look at Emalee and I thank Kayla for her. In an ideal world I'd have all of them together.'

Anthony and Jeda's relationship was slowly healing, but the grief continued. The journey of dealing with the loss of Kayla was eased with the arrival of baby Emalee, but the family still rocks with the impact.

'I catch my dad looking at my girls, and he'll say, "She should be here," meaning Kayla should be with us. And I can only agree,' says Jeda.

'When I talk with people, they ask me how many children I have, and it makes me stop. Sometimes I'll say I have two girls – Liana and Emalee – but it makes me feel guilty to leave Kayla out. Then again, I don't want to ruin a stranger's day by telling them she was stillborn.'

In 2007, Jeda turned her energies towards helping others in a similar situation by hosting a fundraising party on behalf of the Stillbirth

Foundation Australia. She remains closely involved with the parent-led charity, which is working to raise funds to investigate the medical reasons as to why stillbirth occurs. The charitable work also helped Jeda speak openly about Kayla's death, giving voice to her grief and permitting her to connect with others.

'Kayla's story is a public one,' explains Jeda. 'There is so little awareness about the incidence of stillbirth and I believe it needs to be spoken about. If I had the chance I'd talk about it daily. I don't want to scare people about the possibility of it occurring to them, but people need to know that stillbirth can, and does, happen. It is crucial that we are all prepared.'

Jeda is now pregnant with her fourth child, due in August. The nerves are still there, but she only has to look at Emalee to know that she and Anthony will get through this; that it is possible to celebrate a new life. 'Kayla is a powerful force over our family,' she says. 'I am glad I knew her.'

The Australian *The Biggest Loser* series that starred Jeda has been airing in the UK and Ireland. As a result Jeda is receiving messages of hope and support from halfway around the world as the story of Kayla is replayed. Jeda is struck by this, amazed that her daughter's tale is being felt so far away and by so many. 'The world did get to know about her after all,' she says. ●

STILLBIRTH FACTS

- Stillbirth is when a baby dies while inside its mother and can occur at any time from 20 weeks until immediately before birth. One in roughly 140 babies born in Australia is stillborn.
- The rate of unexplained stillbirth in Australia is 10 times more common than Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Family, friends, work colleagues and communities can often feel helpless when they hear of a loved one who has been touched by the sadness of losing a child.
- Ways in which you can support the Stillbirth Foundation Australia, and to help it achieve its goal to reduce the incidence of stillbirth, include making a tax deductible donation, purchasing Stella the Stillbirth Foundation Bear or donating goods and/or services. To donate see stillbirthfoundation.org.au.



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