Pregnancy & Birth After Spinal Cord Injury - Part 1

Episode 246 · September 9, 2021 · with Meaghe Kelleher

IN THIS EPISODE

Meaghe Kelleher joins Dr. Elliot Berlin, DC for part one of a two-part conversation about pregnancy and motherhood after a childhood spinal cord injury. She was nine years old — a young gymnast hanging by her knees from the playground bars — when a fall changed everything: she recounts the helicopter ride to Seattle, months in the hospital, and learning to navigate home, school, and an active family's life from a wheelchair. She shares how she adapted over the years, from the standing frame and arm bike that keep her moving to the drawing, filmmaking, and sideline people-watching that made her an unusually observant listener — skills she now uses every day in her work as a therapist. Along the way: the accessibility battles of college and graduate school, reuniting with the boy she first met in fifth grade, and why starting a family of her own was never really on her radar — until watching her brother become a parent made her think, wait a minute, I can make this work. Part two picks up with conception, pregnancy, and birth.

About this transcript: *This transcript was created with AI-assisted transcription and reviewed by our team. It may not be 100% accurate — names, medical terms, and phrasing can occasionally be mis-transcribed. For exact wording, please listen to the episode audio.*

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Welcome to the informed pregnancy and parenting podcast. I'm your host dr. Elliott Berlin It's my honor today to chat with a very special guest Who will share her unique fertility and pregnancy journey as a woman who had sustained a spinal cord injury in her youth she had important things to consider when navigating her reproductive journey a Native of the Pacific Northwest. She studied psychology and is currently a working therapist She's here to chat all things pregnancy motherhood and shattering the stigma surrounding non-conventional pregnancy Megan Kelleher, welcome to the podcast

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Thanks for having me

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: It's a true honor. So I will just say from the beginning for listeners It's gonna be part one of a two-part podcast because there's a lot to talk about here And as Maggie told

me when she started looking for information for unique pregnancies After spinal cord injury, there was very little information available and I think for both people in the same situation and for Other people it's really important to have information that's not currently widely available I even had a patient with the same scenario and you know, I knew very little and I learned a lot from her I think everybody will learn a lot today from you. Maggie. So let's start at the beginning. Where are you from?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I'm from Ellensburg, Washington. It's a small town kind of right in the middle of the state a lot of apples Uh, we are famous for our rodeo actually Oh really more rodeo than apples. Yeah apples are more like yakama, which is kind of south of us

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Oh, I could travel up and get some apples and hit the rodeo and come home. You'd have a great time Okay, so you have a spinal cord injury when you're very young

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, when I was nine, I fell off some playground bars and suffered a c 3 4 5 injury

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And at that time in the moment, did you realize how substantial the injury was?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: No, when it all happened, it was Very strange just because I was so young. I don't think I understood like the impact of what it actually meant So I was just looking to go out and play and continuing to be a kid and that kind of

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Stalled it for a little bit. Sure. I mean, do you remember the fall?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I remember it. So I was hanging by my knees like upside down I was a gymnast when I was younger so doing tricks all the time So it wasn't anything abnormal. I was hanging by my knees and then all of a sudden I just remember being face down on the ground In like the cedar chips, you know that they have under oh underneath Yeah, and then you know being in the ambulance being helicoptered like there's these brief flashes of it

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And do you know how high you were up off the ground?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: So I don't remember I wasn't extremely high off the ground It's those playground bars that you know, there's the lower level a middle and a high one and I was on the middle one I never went over the lower one

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And then I mean did you land on your head?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, i'm pretty sure I landed on my head and I was kind of in a Face down position if I remember right, so I don't even know what happens You know, i'm a big believer that everything happens for a reason and that when I don't have A logical explanation for how I fell it's just it had to happen. I guess

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Were there other people around?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, it was with my really good friend and she was there and she helped me get help for me. Yeah.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And then you mentioned the helicopter. Is that because where you were, there wasn't like a substantial trauma unit?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, it's a fairly small town. And so I was airlifted to Harborview in Seattle.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Okay. And how did things progress when you got there?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I think I was in surgery pretty soon. I don't have very good memories of it. It's kind of in and out. And then I was transferred to Children's Hospital for the recovery portion of it. I think I was in that hospital for like two, three months.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Wow. I mean, when they did the surgery, when you came out of surgery, were they giving you ideas on what long-term effects you would have?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah. I think they were telling me that stuff all the time and just being a kid, I was like, well, why can I go play? You know, I didn't know. I don't know. I remember just being like, yeah, why are you talking to me? Like, I gotta go. But I think they were trying to be like, no, this is gonna look different when you come home.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And how was that transition back home?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Well, my family is amazing. So I think I've had one of the better transitions. They're just super supportive and willing to do anything to support each other.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: All right. So to what extent were the injuries and how did the new picture look for you? What were you able to do or not do?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I was pretty immobile from the beginning and then slowly as I recovered, I gained more strength, more ability, but in the beginning, I couldn't even itch my nose. And that a lot of through physical therapy, occupational therapy, a lot of that came back. So obviously can't walk, but I have movement in my arms that I can use like my fingers. I don't have control to open and close my hand and things like that. As people with disabilities know, you just get really good at adapting to things. So figuring out how to do things differently. But yeah, navigating the house in a wheelchair. Of course, there were some crashes to the walls, stuff like that, but got better at it.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: When you were really little, when this all started, because I know that the wheelchairs today, they have like incredible chairs that can do a lot. Did they have that kind of technology when you were little?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, it was pretty good. It's a lot better now, as you say, but I still had a chair that tilted back to really pressure sores or just being able to move around. But yeah, the turning radius has gotten a lot better.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: All right, I wanna find out more about what it was like to grow up and to adapt. And then we'll get to soon pregnancy and childbirth. We're gonna take a quick break and I'll be right back. and brand D, four times. Welcome back to the Informed Pregnancy podcast. We're talking to Maggie Kelleher. All right. So, once you figured out what you had to work with, I mean, at nine years old, you're just still in middle school. How was that, you know,

MEAGHE KELLEHER: going back to school for you? It was really bizarre. Leaving school one day with bodying, coming back one day in a wheelchair. So, it was just strange to navigate that. Over time, it became more normal. But in the beginning, it was very much just all the things I couldn't do

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: because I was so used to doing so much. Right. I mean, I mentioned as a gymnast, you did a ton with your body and more active than most. Yeah. So, the contrast for you must have been bigger than it would be for other people.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah. I come from a really super active family. Swimming, gymnastics, football, all the basketball, you name it. So, yeah, that was a big chunk of hobbies taken away. So, figuring out, you know, what else do I like to do?

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Yeah. So, first of all, are there active things that you can still do? And also, what hobbies replaced those things?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I got pretty into drawing. I got really into TV shows and making little movies, things like that. Spending time with friends, of course. A lot of my time ended up being spent just being in a server, you know, really paying attention to people because a lot of times I wasn't the one getting to interact. So, I was the one on the sidelines. But I think it helps me become more empathetic, more aware, more keen to details. You know, it helps me in my job today as a therapist. So, that became an odd little hobby, I guess.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Actually, it makes sense. A therapist who really is observant can really pick up a lot. In addition to all the training and skills that you have, it's just your mode of operation is to be looking and listening and picking up on things.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Got really good at that.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Yeah, it's an extra cool skill for what you do. Do you do exercises? And like, you know, by high school, I imagine the injuries that you have were set, they weren't going to change too much. In high school, were there things that you need to do or want to do? And also, are there things that you get to do? Like, as an active person, are there organizations or resources available for you to be able to be active in whatever ways you're able to?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah. So, I do a thing called a standing frame. I'm not sure if you're familiar with it, but it's just a pretty basic device that helps you stand up. And so, that's really good for circulation and bone density. So, I try to do that for, if I can, an hour every day. And I've done that since my injury. So, that's been really helpful. It's not really aerobic or anything, but it gets the blood flowing. I also have an arm bike. So, it's similar to a bike that you would do with your legs is stationary though. And I do it for cardio for my arms. And I've been doing that for lots of years. In terms of any sports, I can kind of play tennis with my husband a little bit. It's nothing like,

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I don't know, I wouldn't win any awards for it, but it's fun though. So, I like that. And my dad's really into fitness. So, he's always helping me come up with different ways to, you know, tie stretch bands, to do kind of workouts and stuff like that. So, kind of being innovative with that stuff's been fun.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Do you have some use of your legs?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I can move them a little bit. Nothing to the effect of putting, like, weight on them to stand or anything. But if I need to kind of move my foot, I can move it a little bit, or I can lift my leg up if I need to kind of wiggle. But nothing big.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Do you have sensation?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah. So, that's the thing that I think when I meet any doctor, they like don't believe me at first. Because with that injury, it is incomplete. So, it wasn't completely severed. But most people, you know, lose sensation, a good chunk of it. But I can feel all the way to my toes. I can feel if something's in my shoe, all that stuff. So, that's been really, I'm really thankful for that still being intact.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: All right. Again, I'm so grateful to you for how open you are. And I would love to continue the journey. We're going to just take another little break and we'll be right back. and what you want to do?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: That's a good question. I always knew I wanted to major in psychology. I was really into forensics and things like that in high school and yeah, forensics and psychology. So I declared right away psychology when I went to college and then I added communications as a major as well because I was thinking, well, maybe I want to go into advertising of some sort. And then once I graduated, it was really hard to find a job with an undergrad and those degrees, great degrees, but usually, at least from my experience, it needed to go further in education to really get a job in a field that I really wanted to do. And so I ended up deciding, what's a job where I would sit a lot? And I thought, well, a therapist, actually. I'm suited for that one.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: And it sounded really interesting. So that's what I ended up studying in my master's program, counseling psychology.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: And that's what you do, you're a therapist. You know, sometimes it seems, I guess this is what we said before is that I feel like sometimes therapists are, after sitting all day, just very antsy in the seat, but you're used to it. So were there challenges in doing a graduate program through college for you?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I think the biggest thing is just accessibility structure-wise. So buildings that are only stairs or the doors are not automated, stuff like that. So those were probably my biggest obstacles, just physical barriers that easily could have been a ramp or there could easily be a button there. So I'm a big advocate for those things to get fixed.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it sounds like in general, like the world was moving in that direction anyway, trying to be as accommodating to as many people as possible.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, it's getting better.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Okay, so you're married.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yes.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: How did you meet your husband?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: We actually met in the fifth grade.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Whoa.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, it's not as sweet a story as that sounds like. We did not talk to each other and it was very much the boys against the girls in fifth grade. So I met him in fifth grade, but we didn't start dating until I was like 19 or 20. We reconnected through a mutual friend.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: How was dating?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: It was fun. I liked it. My husband's just a really great person, so it was easy.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Oh, well, that's nice. So if you were 19 or 20, how long were you together before you decided, this is it, you're the one?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Well, I think we both kind of knew pretty early on that we ended up dating for like five years before getting engaged. And so we started dating in 2007, got married in 2013.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Okay. And then were you talking about kids early on?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I don't even think it was a conversation we ever had. Oh, in all the years of dating? I don't remember one. Maybe it happened, but I don't remember it.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Do you guys each have siblings?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, we each have a lot of siblings.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Do you two?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, we each have three siblings.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Oh, which one are you out of the four?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: I, so I have an older brother and then it's me and I have two younger sisters.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Are you guys close?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, yeah, especially me and my sisters. One lives near me and the other one lives in my hometown, but we're really close.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: That's nice. Which one is your husband out of the four there?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: He's the oldest.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Ah, the oldest and the first middle child.

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yep.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: I would say you are. Okay, so if you weren't talking about it early on, when did it come up as a thought?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: So my brother ended up having a kid with his wife and I remember just kind of watching that and being like, hmm, I think I can do that too. And I think it just was never on my radar of something to do. Cause I just doing kind of anything that a quote unquote normal person would do, right? It's a little bit harder for me. And so that wasn't really in my radar. But then I saw that and I was like, well, if he can do it, I can do it. And you know, him and his wife are great and stuff. So just being exposed to it and seeing that and being like, ooh, I actually think I want that. Yeah. And it felt doable. I was like, wait a minute. I think I can make this work.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Do you remember your first conversations about it?

MEAGHE KELLEHER: Yeah, I remember checking in with my husband just saying, hey, you know, I'm thinking about this. What do you think? I was like, well, I'm good either way. If we end up not having kids, I'll be happy. And if we do, I'll be happy as well. So I think he very much recognizes it's if the woman's getting pregnant, that's a big. on the woman there, so. Yeah, the whole thing, pregnancy and beyond. Yeah, he was just supportive, and he was like, I think we'd be really great parents, so.

DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: I bet you are. All right. Well, we've talked about a lot, and now we're going to take a break. We're going to do a part B to this episode to really find out more about your fertility, pregnancy, birth, and parenting journey. Tune in for part two, and we'll see you there. Thanks for listening to the Informed Pregnancy Podcast. If you'd like to connect, visit us on Instagram at Dr. Berlin. It's D-O-C-T-O-R-B-E-R-L-I-N.

Enjoying the Informed Pregnancy Podcast?

Visit us at **informedpregnancy.com** for episodes, articles, and resources for pregnancy, birth, and beyond.

Want more? Subscribe to **Informed Pregnancy+** at **informedpregnancy.tv** for films, series, and exclusive content.