Selah Victor: Before Birth

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IN THIS EPISODE

Actress and comedian Selah Victor joins Empowered Mama host Arista Ilona — with an introduction from Dr. Elliot Berlin, DC — to look back on her first two cesarean births ahead of her third baby's arrival. Her first C-section, with an almost-11-pound baby who spent five days in the NICU, left her feeling unexpectedly at peace; her second, an unplanned pandemic-era C-section in August 2020, was traumatic enough that she swore she was done having kids. Now, after a surprise pregnancy, she's educating herself and preparing for a VBAC — and talking honestly about the shame, guilt, and second-guessing that can follow a cesarean, and why every birth deserves to be called a natural birth.

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DR. ELLIOT BERLIN, DC: Hey, it's dr. B here You're about to listen to the empowering audio from a brand new program on informed pregnancy plus called empowered mama with Alana Arista want to see all the amazing birth story interviews and access a wealth of pregnancy and parenting content head over to Informed pregnancy TV and join us as we celebrate and support empowered mamas everywhere right now Enjoy the pre-birth episode with my good friend actress and comedian Sailor Victor

ARISTA ILONA: Aristolani here with informed pregnancy plus and my guest today is sailor Amazing mama of almost three boys almost. Yeah, so she's very busy And tired we imagine right always time. Thank you so much for being me Yeah, it's c-section awareness month. Yeah, so we wanted to highlight the c-section. Yes. Yeah. Yeah, I've had to

SELAH VICTOR: I am going for a V back with this one. I did have two with my first son He was almost 11 pounds Yes, so, um, I don't know if you want to just jump right into yeah

ARISTA ILONA: I mean the one thing I think comes to mind with having two suit two c-sections, which I had to did you also? yeah, um is Like were there any differences between?

SELAH VICTOR: Yes, if you want to start there so much difference and in fact We'll explain why I want to do the be back with this one The first one I felt such a peace about he was because he was almost 11 pounds I When he came out I have to be honest I was like thank God for c-sections. He was just so big and I know that right like and there is there's a lot of risk with big babies like that and He was also IVF Which has there's there are some theories out there that it could have to do with why he was so big being IVF, but he was also a week late 41 weeks and I didn't know a lot about what I know now about as far as like natural induction or Working to get the baby in the right position work with dr Berlin and I think I went to dr

SELAH VICTOR: Berlin once during that pregnancy because my hip hurt and someone was like go see dr. Berlin

ARISTA ILONA: Well, I mean he fixes us like so quick. I know you can't be so good because then I want to keep saying

SELAH VICTOR: It's kind of true. I know I've had literally no pain this whole pregnancy because I've seen like every week but yeah, so I didn't know what I didn't know and Still I feel like that. I felt very much peace about it. The c-section was great. I got to play my music I got him right on my chest We were together the first 12 hours and then he did have to go to the NICU, which was sort of a bummer It was really really hard. The reason he was in the NICU was because he was so big Really? Well, that's something that you don't hear. I know people he was like a giant the NICU nurses were like This is hilarious. We're they just concerned if it's like breathing his blood sugar and his breathing actually similar to other

SELAH VICTOR: C-section babies the lungs how they don't fully develop all the time that the risk of exactly So because they get that extra breathing practice through the vaginal canal So he was having a little trouble breathing, but really it was the blood sugar it kept crashing and So he was there for five days and that was super hard five days for me felt like Eternity and I don't know how people I mean, people have a lot of work. I was lucky to be able to take him home, you know, but I, my heart goes out to people who have to be in the NICU because it's just so hard anyway. So, but even though that all happened, I did get those first 12 hours with him and I felt very bonded and breastfeeding got right on track and all this stuff.

SELAH VICTOR: So it was, I felt peace about the whole thing. So then when I got pregnant with number two, I, I don't know, looking back, it was, uh, the pandemic. I got pregnant December of 2019. And by the way, side, funny story. When I first went to my first doctor's appointment, I'll never forget. She was like, don't worry. By the time this, by the time you have your baby, this will all be over like August 2020.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah, right. I know.

SELAH VICTOR: Like, well, you're a bit off with your math there, but yeah. So it was like the middle of the pandemic, nobody's doing anything. You know, it was very, it was just a weird time as we all know. So I didn't really do anything to prepare for the birth. I just, I don't know.

ARISTA ILONA: I mean, how could you though? Right? I know everything was just so up in the air.

SELAH VICTOR: I guess there was like online stuff I could have, I mean, you know, but I don't know. I really naively assumed I'm just going to have a VBAP, right? Like I didn't even think about it. I just was like, yeah, that's what I'm doing. I didn't try to do anything special. I didn't.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah.

SELAH VICTOR: I couldn't go to Dr. Berlin or somebody like that, but I just assumed. And so my 39 week appointment came and I went in and she said, your fluids are super low. Let's come back later and check them. But I did. And they were still low. And she's like, we've got to get this baby out tonight. It's like, what?

ARISTA ILONA: You know, I mean, were you ready for that kind of response?

SELAH VICTOR: Not at all. Like I, again, I was just like, naively thought I would push this baby out, you know, but then you start getting scared and worried. And again, I was not as educated. Not that I think I know it all now, but I didn't know what I didn't know. And it was the middle of August. It was very, very hot. I like it's very hot. I had done this super long walk the night before. I'm sure I was a little dehydrated, you know, I could have probably gone home, chugged a bunch of water. She did say, you can go on an IV for fluids, but it probably won't help. And I just thought, okay, well, I guess this is my fate. I'm going to have another C-section. So I go in and of course, with all the COVID, I mean, it was crazy, August 2020.

SELAH VICTOR: I was lucky to have my husband there, all that. So I was trying to like be calm and Zen about it, but it was, it was just a very weird atmosphere.

ARISTA ILONA: I think that was the height of it.

SELAH VICTOR: Yes, it was the height of it.

ARISTA ILONA: I feel like that's like when everything kicked in, we're like, as far as the fear of it, right?

SELAH VICTOR: Yes. And the testing and the, they tested us, I think twice. I don't remember. I had to wear a mask the whole time, except I took it off when they were about to pull them out because I was like, I'm not meeting my baby with a mask on, like, sorry. Um, but anyway, so the, the story is crazy and a little, it was very traumatic, but now I understand it from a different perspective. So I'm going to kind of tell you both things. Like when it first happened, this is what I thought was happening, which was I heard a bunch of screaming and emergent reactions as she was cutting me open with the second, with the second, yeah, from the doctor. And all of a sudden she was very frantic. The energy was very frantic.

SELAH VICTOR: And this is again, like what I was experiencing. You're under an epidural. You're, yeah, so you're just like, what is happening? I heard my husband's voice sound like he was going to cry thinking one of us is not okay here. This is not okay. And she's yelling for all these teams to come in and people to come in. And so I'm like, this is not good. You know, immediately they did push it, put them on my chest for like a minute, but then whisked him straight to the NICU. So that was also very traumatic. I'm in recovery all alone.

ARISTA ILONA: Cause they announcing like what they were doing and why as they were, or it was just like the vibe was just off.

SELAH VICTOR: The vibe was totally off. It was very emergent and I didn't know. No, at the time I had no idea what they were taking away. They're like, he's okay, but, um, we got to get him out. We got to get him breathing. His breathing was not great. They did say that, but they didn't say why, like what was happening. So they take them. I'm in recovery completely alone for, I don't even know how many hours, but a lot, you know, so it was extremely unsettling. He was also in the NICU five days trying to breastfeed with all the wires hooked up. It's just like so stressful and not at all, but any of us. Imagine. No. Yeah. So that was not fun. Hence, after that, I was actually done having kids after that experience.

SELAH VICTOR: I'm not doing this again. That was terrible. So, but we had a surprise pregnancy with this one. And I said, I'm like, I'm not doing that again. I cannot even fathom myself in the OR. I get it. Like I said, the first one, I felt peace about the C-section. I'm grateful we have C-sections. Many women died in childbirth. My own grandmother gave birth to my dad, who was nine-something, breech. And she was like, I wish I had a C-section. So I get it. There are so many positive things. But that experience was pretty traumatic. So I just now I'm like, OK, I have to educate myself, see what I can do differently this time. And try to just go a different way.

ARISTA ILONA: And would you say the decision coming into wanting to have a VBAC, is it because specifically, like what's the biggest challenge from the C-sections that is having you now not want to do that again?

SELAH VICTOR: Well, I think so both babies, he was also in the NICU because of the breathing thing coming through. And I don't know for sure that's from the C-section situation. But like, you know, we've I've read we all kind of know that that can happen from C-section. So I'm trying. I really that's a huge motivating factor is to not be in the NICU again and to have an easier recovery. Although I'm also aware that vaginal recovery can be pretty difficult as well.

ARISTA ILONA: I think both sides of the coin, right? It's like they both have their challenges.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah. Yeah.

ARISTA ILONA: And the things that we just don't know that it's going to come come from it. Are you prepared if it ends up being another C-section? Have you processed that process?

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah, I mean, it's hard. Like I listen to so many podcast episodes right now and like the ones that and I mean, I cry every time when it's a VBAC story. Like every time I just like it's so moved and I know that's my heart telling me like I really I need that. Yeah, I got to do it. But if it did at the end of the day, Dr. Berlin actually said it this way and I think he's right. Like every birth plan in a weird way should end in the C-section because it's like you want a healthy baby and healthy mom. Like you don't want anything catastrophic. Obviously, nobody does.

ARISTA ILONA: Nobody does.

SELAH VICTOR: So that is why we have C-sections. And I'm also delivering in a hospital. So I'm not doing a home birth. I'm not doing a I actually I love home birth. And if I had to start all over again, I probably would have my first one.

ARISTA ILONA: I mean, I definitely tried my first one at home. You did. Unsuccessful. And then got transferred. Yeah, that's the whole story for another day.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah.

ARISTA ILONA: And you hear that story a lot.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah. You know where it's like and that was why I didn't in the first place.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah.

SELAH VICTOR: But then you also hear about the interventions or the lack thereof. For example, with my second, I also think I could have been induced. You know, so that was.

ARISTA ILONA: But the doctor had their reasons.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah, exactly.

ARISTA ILONA: And when we look back, we're always kind of caught up in the shit of what it could have.

SELAH VICTOR: Exactly.

ARISTA ILONA: And I think that's like the toughest, heaviest part, right? We start like rethinking our actions or the way the story could have been better or what we could have done different. And at the end of the day, it's like there is no perfect outcome. Right. Except really having that healthy, healthy mom.

SELAH VICTOR: Yes.

ARISTA ILONA: And healthy baby. And even with babies being in NICU, you know, it's not that they're unhealthy, but it's like, right. It's like a way to still help them. Yes. Be okay and be healthy.

SELAH VICTOR: Right. Absolutely.

ARISTA ILONA: You're in the mom club of the NICU mom club and now the C-section mom club.

SELAH VICTOR: I know. And it's like, is that. Not a club I want to be.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah. I'm sure that that's, you know, tough. But do you have any like friends who are also in that same club with you?

SELAH VICTOR: So many. I mean, and you're right. Like we should be so grateful we live in this time and in America, for goodness sakes, where we have access to really tend to these amazing NICU Cedar Sinai. Hello. You know, the best. And I am truly grateful. But also at the, at the same time, I think, well, I should say this first as well. In addition to being grateful, no birth. It should be like, I hope people don't feel shame or anything about having, you know what I mean? Because I

remember sitting in a specialist office when I didn't believe my OB that my first was almost 11 pounds. So I went to see Dr. Rad, who's on the podcast a lot.

ARISTA ILONA: And.

SELAH VICTOR: And he predicted the first weight almost to the ounce. It was crazy.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah.

SELAH VICTOR: He was like spot on and it was, he was 10, 15.

ARISTA ILONA: My first, yeah. My first was eight, three. And I thought that was big.

SELAH VICTOR: It is.

ARISTA ILONA: 10, 15. It's just crazy. It's like twins in one baby.

SELAH VICTOR: I know. So all that to say, I remember sitting there and I was reading this random article. It wasn't even in a pregnancy magazine. It was like in Vogue about some celebrity. And she said it so well how every birth should be called a natural birth. Do you know what I mean?

ARISTA ILONA: It's really wrong the way we refer to and kind of makes you feel that shame a little bit. Oh, it does. Yeah, there's so much shame in it. And I've heard even often that, oh, it's the easy way out, right? And it's like, there's no part of it that is easy whatsoever. In my own experience, and I don't know if you've ever felt this come up, but almost feeling that there was something taken away, like an experience, right? There is that form of major guilt and shame and being hard on ourselves of like, why didn't my body perform correctly? I can't do it. I wasn't meant to maybe be a mom. Like the thoughts just start flooding your mind, I feel like when it comes to C-sections

ARISTA ILONA: and even preparing, because my second was I planned it, and I just feel like you still kind of have like those sentiments of feeling almost not good enough and like weird, witty things.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah, it sort of sets you up for like questioning yourself as a mom, which that I agree. Like I don't love that. Like where I feel I felt a lot of anxiety postpartum, not to the point where I had I feel really bad even saying that, because I know a lot of people really struggle with that. But just like second guessing yourself, you know?

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah, and I have to wonder if it's because, you know, we may normalize vaginal births and V-backs more than we do C-sections, and that it is such like a like, oh my God, don't do that thing, right? Because of all the complications that can happen, but yeah, I mean, I think that's why I'm so, so happy to be here sharing your story and the stories of the other women who came, you know, before you in the series just to spread so much awareness around how different each C-section experience can be and that not all of it can be like end up as shameful, right? So there is a sense of how can we feel empowered in the C-section?

SELAH VICTOR: Even the first, like I said, my first one, I felt like, well, jokes on all of you. Like, this was great. You know, I mean, the NICU was not fun, but the C-section I recovered so quickly the first time. The second one wasn't so bad either. Like I have to admit recovery was not terrible, but still, as you know, it's

ARISTA ILONA: intense. You can't really walk. It's like terrible.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah.

ARISTA ILONA: But you know, you don't really have anything to compare it to when you, when it's all you know. Like, I mean, that's all I knew. And you know, unless you compare it with like with your friends, right? Your girlfriends, you're like talking about it. But I've heard some stories with Imaginal Births too, that I'm just like, okay, so you know, either way, where it's just...

SELAH VICTOR: Birth is challenging, you know, like it has its things. And I think too, I don't know about you with your own mom and the stories you hear. I had eight kids, all vaginally, no drugs. So and she was just like the superwoman. So you do, you feel like a sense of failure almost, like, why couldn't I do that? My mom was fine. She was superwoman. So it is that kind of shame and that guilt. But at the same time, I also think that is part of society in the way, similar to like breastfeeding, how we, no, feed your baby, just feed him anyway you can.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah. Wow. Oh my gosh. I mean, I'm so happy and thrilled for you.

SELAH VICTOR: Thank you.

ARISTA ILONA: You have such a growing family. It's exciting. Three boys.

SELAH VICTOR: Yes.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah. That must be so fun and so crazy.

SELAH VICTOR: It's going to be insane.

ARISTA ILONA: I know.

SELAH VICTOR: I have six brothers of those eight. So I feel like I was born for this. But yeah.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah, you were. And I mean, that's something that to like remember, right, for all of you watching too, it's like, yeah, you're going through it and you were born for it. No matter what experience you go through, the really, really heavy, heavy heaviness of it and, you know, the joy in it, the grief in it, the shame. I mean, we're not given our experiences for no reason.

SELAH VICTOR: That's right.

ARISTA ILONA: Yeah. I think remembering like our makeup, the fabric of who we are as individuals are so different, but it's so unique to each person.

SELAH VICTOR: Yeah.

ARISTA ILONA: It still doesn't make it any easier to go through those hard moments like after you see your baby And then they're rushed to Nick you or you know it's still terrifying, but knowing like no I but I could do this like yeah You know this was presented to me for a reason and to remember like

SELAH VICTOR: You know you can make it through and at the end of the day someone told me this too after the first one Was like it's not like every day as a mom Yes, we were talking about

second-guessing yourself and stuff But every day that relationship that you have with your child you're not thinking about the birth You just love them so much. You know it's just it's not as we put so much weight on it myself included Especially right now, but it at it It's not that in a month in a day, and it's you and the baby. It's you and your child

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