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FINDING HOPE AFTER LOSS

Minister and mum's powerful pregnancy journey

Talara McHugh

From the depths of grief to the joyous arrival of a new baby, Selena Uibo shares her story of preterm birth and pregnancy loss in honour of World Prematurity Week. As the Remote Housing and Homelands Minister, Local Member for Arnhem and proud Nunggubuyu woman, her voice is a powerful one used to bring attention to First Nations disadvantage. Now she's using it to honour the memory of her sons, Astro and Orion, born and lost within 14 months.

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Selena Uibo with husband Corey, daughter Radiance and son Phoenix. Picture: Lisa Pilbeam Photography

From tragedy, springs hope

Talara McHugh

****WARNING: This article contains details about losing a child during pregnancy.**

When Selena Uibo found out she was expecting her fourth child in late 2022, she was overcome with emotion and burst into tears.

But they weren't tears of joy, they were of anxiety and fear: fear of losing another little bundle of joy after previously suffering two tragic preterm baby losses.

As the Remote Housing and Homelands Minister, Local Member for Arnhem and proud Nunggubuyu woman, Mrs Uibo's voice is a powerful one used to bring attention to First Nations disadvantage.

Now she's using it to honour the memory of her sons, Astro and Orion, born and lost within 14 months.

This is her story.

On the eve of daughter Radiance's first birthday in May 2021, Minister Uibo was overjoyed to learn she was expecting her second child.

But things took a turn for the worse when her waters broke suddenly just shy of the 20-week mark.

She was rushed to Katherine Hospital, where she soon went into labour and was told her baby had little chance of survival.

Her son, Astro, was born a "perfectly formed little boy" at 19.5 weeks but tragically wasn't breathing.

Before this, there were no issues with the pregnancy; making the loss that much more shattering for Minister Uibo and her family.

"It was very emotional, especially given there was nothing wrong with Astro – he was just so little," she said.

Less than a year later, Minister Uibo and husband Corey were expecting once again but were cautious after the loss of baby Astro.

"Doctors chose to take precautionary measures with extra monitoring and testing – although nothing was definitive about why we lost Astro," she said.

"We had our 17-week scan



Minister Selena Uibo with husband Corey and daughter Radiance, welcomed Phoenix in August. Picture: Supplied

and they checked the cervix and found it was less than 2cm – very short – so it was recommended I have a cervical suture, or stitch around the cervix, two days later,

"The procedure went very well, but they did tell us there was a high risk we could lose the baby during surgery or shortly after.

"Our very experienced doctor in Katherine had managed to do the stitch and I was monitored closely for the next 48 hours."

The next few weeks passed smoothly and just as the couple felt the worst was behind them, Minister Uibo's waters broke at the 21-week mark.

"We'd gone from mentally

thinking we were in the safe zone ... and had just started dropping our guard a bit and, then, that next day happened so quick," she said.

"I had a massive headache one afternoon after Corey and Rae Rae had gone off to the playground, so I had a lie down. I started having cramps in my stomach at that point."

She was taken back to Katherine Hospital where the same doctor who had delivered Astro told her that she would be going into labour.

Baby Orion was born not breathing – just two weeks more developed than older brother Astro.

She spent two days in the hospital with Orion who was

placed in a cold cot to bond before saying goodbye.

"The nurses were amazing. They'd come in and have a cry with me," she said.

"Radiance also came in to spend time with her little brother. She was a bit older this time so she would ask questions and wonder why he wasn't coming home or why mummy was crying."

When the couple found out they were expecting for the fourth time in late 2022, they found it difficult to get excited after the loss of their baby boys.

"When we realised we were pregnant I burst into tears, but not happy tears, anxious tears because we were waiting to be rescheduled to have a fairly new

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procedure in the NT ... which is not done pregnant," she said.

"During the whole pregnancy every time I went to the bathroom I was anxious that something would happen, that I would see bleeding and suffer another pregnancy loss."

On August 4, 2023, Minister Uibo and her family welcomed a healthy baby boy, Phoenix, into the world.

"When we had Phoenix there were so many emotions, seeing him delivered safely and alive," she said.

"We had three doctors present when we had the planned caesarean for Phoenix; the on duty doctor who had delivered Radiance, the doctor who had given us antenatal care for both Orion and Phoenix and the doctor who had delivered both Astro and Orion, who came in on her day off to be there for the birth,

"It was also a special date, 4th of August, as it was the date my mother passed two years before, so I feel like even though Phoenix didn't meet his Gagu (grandmother) that he will always be connected to her."

CLOSING THE GAP ON PRETERM BIRTH

Minister Uibo's story is one shared by many First Nations women across Australia who are twice as likely as non-Indigenous women to experience preterm birth.

Despite previous progress, recent Closing the Gap data has shown the official target for healthy birth weights for babies is currently "not on track".

In the Northern Territory, First Nations women are four times more likely to lose a baby between 20 and 23 weeks gestational age.

Kiarna Brown is a First Nations obstetrician, gynaecologist and leader of the Top End

Alliance working to close the gap in preterm birth rates.

Dr Brown said while there had been progress made nationally, the NT was "losing birth time" when compared with the rest of Australia.

"We face big challenges when compared to the rest of the country and it will no doubt be a long road but we can't continue to accept the outcomes that we're seeing," she said.

"When the national data is collated, we in the NT are persistently recording the highest rates across the country.

"Nationally the rate is 8 per cent but in the NT it's more like 14 per cent but there's pockets where it falls to 20 per cent and that burden falls on women from Aboriginal communities."

While there are a "multitude" of social and health factors contributing to preterm birth, Dr Brown identified remoteness as a significant barrier in accessing prenatal care.

"Remoteness can influence several key statistics for First Nations women including smoking rates, antenatal visit in the first trimester, low birth weights and of course, preterm birth," she said.

She said it was important for health systems to recognise and address risk factors such as remoteness, education, housing, transport and finance with cultural sensitivity.

Through her work, Dr Brown is leading a preterm birth prevention program encouraging women to reduce risk factors, recognise milestones and better engage with health providers.

"We want women to be the drivers of their pregnancy care and to better understand an approach to reaching term, rather than preventing preterm birth. By doing this we will have the opportunity to positively impact the health of future generations," Dr Brown said.

The Alliance also advocates for improved care for pregnant women across the Top End, working alongside chapters in each state/territory as part of the Commonwealth-funded Every Week Counts National Preterm Birth Prevention Collaborative, which aims to reduce the preterm and early birthrate by 20 per cent by July 2024.



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