



## When a healthy pregnancy turns deadly. The story of April Valentine

Dispatcher: 911, what's your emergency?

Caller: America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying! (ambulance siren)

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar**.

**(music)**

**Code WACK!** is committed to highlighting racial injustices in health care and in honor of Juneteenth, we're featuring April Valentine's story.

**April Valentine** knew that Black women were more likely to die from a pregnancy or childbirth-related cause and did everything she could to ensure her and her baby's safety after becoming pregnant last year. So why did the 31-year-old woman die while she was at an L.A.-area hospital about to give birth to her baby girl? What can be done to better protect Black women, like April and track star Tori Bowie who recently died in labor, who are so vulnerable? To find out, we spoke to April's doula, **Stanis Askew**, who works with **Frontline Doulas**, a perinatal health program that connects Black families with Black doulas. [Research shows](#) that expectant mothers matched with doulas have better birth outcomes. This is April's tragic story told through the eyes of her doula.

**April Valentine was thrilled when she and her boyfriend Nigha (pronounced Ny-jah) became pregnant in 2022 and wanted all the support they could get in delivering their first baby. So, the 31-year-old Southern California woman applied for and**

**received a scholarship through Frontline Doulas, a perinatal health program that connects Black families with Black doulas. That's how April met doula Stanis Askew. They started working together when April was about 17 weeks pregnant.**

*Askew: April had reached out. We just naturally kind of clicked...She was just a light to begin with. Let's just put that there. She was a true light and a joy to be around, and an advocate for herself and for others. So she had done her research and knew how important it was and that's part of why she wanted the program to have a doula. She knew the statistics.*

**April knew that Black maternal mortality was much higher than it was for White women and thought that having a doula would increase her chances of having a healthy pregnancy and birth. Stanis and April came up with a birth plan that included three prenatal visits, attendance of the birth and three postpartum sessions. But after the first prenatal visit, April said she didn't think three prenatal sessions would be enough. She wanted more time with Stanis considering they'd be in the delivery room together during such an intimate setting.**

*Askew: And so she said, 'I think I at least need a weekly call. Like I want to be able to check in weekly.' 'You know what, we can do that. And if there's some time that I can come in person and meet with you, in addition to, I'm okay with doing that too, because it's not about the money for me. It's truly about you having a great birthing experience, having this birthing story to tell.' So she herself was already an advocate for herself and for other people around.*

**April told Stanis that she wanted as natural a childbirth as possible and wanted to avoid a C-section at all costs unless there was an emergency.**

**She also sought out and chose a Black female OB/GYN to help her deliver the baby. When April was 19 weeks pregnant, she informed her doctor that she was using a doula to support her throughout her pregnancy and birth process.**

*Askew: Her doctor was 'Great. That's wonderful. We'll incorporate that like when she gets your birth plan. We'll work together. It's not a problem.'*

*Different hospitals have different requirements and different hospitals will allow different support people. So this doctor in particular said, 'this is the hospital that I prefer and they'll allow two support people. And then your doula will be counted as part of my medical staff.' So truly she would be allowed to have three people supporting her so she could have the father of her baby -- the boyfriend -- and then also her sister, and then myself because I wasn't going to be counted as one of her support people. 'So Okay.'*

**April chose walking as her mode of exercise during her pregnancy, walking three miles a day three times a week. As her due date approached, she walked even more. Two days before her due date, she had an appointment with her doctor, who informed her she wanted to induce her.**

*Askew: Why does she want to induce you? Was your blood pressure up? Did she see something with the baby? Immediately I'm like, questioning she's like, 'No, no, nothing.' Okay. So she's like, 'but she wanted to put the balloon in, which is the Foley bulb. She wants to put the Foley bulb in and ... but she's like, 'I told her I was scared.' So (the doctor) said, 'Okay, work with your doula over the weekend, come back on Monday, and we'll see where you're at' because she was at one centimeter dilation then. So, 'okay, not a problem.'*

**The next day, April walked six miles with her sister and the following day, she and Stanis walked another four miles.**

*Askew: Everything was good. She's definitely what I would call your early stages. Feeling the contractions tightening of the belly Things are moving.*

**Stanis went home and the two kept in contact throughout the night as April's contractions got stronger. The next day, April went to her 4 p.m. appointment, where the doctor told her she was three centimeters dilated, was progressing nicely and wanted her to eat and then meet her at the hospital. That confused Stanis, since April was progressing nicely on her own.**

*Askew: What happens is in the hospital setting, your body slows down, because it's a new environment...so the progression will stop. So, I was like, 'Okay, so do you want me to come and meet you before we go to the hospital or how do you want to do this?' And so she decided that I would meet her at the hospital. She was gonna go get something to eat. And then when she got to the hospital, she would let me know so I can meet her there and then we could labor at the hospital and move forward.*

**But when April spoke to Stanis a couple hours later from the hospital, she had surprising news.**

*Askew: She's like I've been admitted but now they're saying they're not going to allow you in...At this point then she gets panicky. They said they're not going to let you in. I'm like okay, calm down, it's gonna be alright, 'I'm not leaving you' was my exact words, 'you are not doing this alone. I'm not leaving you. We will text. We will video call. We will do whatever it is. It's just a curveball. But here's the things I need you to do... So I'm like, I need you to ask them for a peanut ball. Because that's going to help keep your cervix open.*

*She texted me back and said they don't have one. Okay, 'get additional pillows to keep in between your knees to help keep you open, until they force you to lay down. They may try to give you an IV, that's fine but still be as mobile as possible. We'll talk our way through this. We'll figure out our game plan. It's just a little curve ball.' She's like 'okay.'*

*She was like, 'Why would they do that?' You know, so I'm just trying to help her remain calm at this point. I'm trying to keep myself calm as well. But yeah, it was up until this point, every week she's been asking and confirming with the doctor, I had sent credentials in to confirm that I have the credentials to be in the hospital. So you go to the hospital and you get told, 'No, now your doula's not allowed to be in.'*

**April and Stanis stayed in contact throughout the night. When Stanis called April at 7 a.m., April said she was progressing and that the doctor was supposed to be coming in anytime now. She also said she had taken the epidural.**

*Askew: She said, 'they got really strong.' 'That's perfectly fine. You took the epidural. You're okay. There's no shame in that like if that's what you need and they gave it to you. That's what you do.' So we continue to converse throughout the day through phone calls and text messages. At nine o'clock ... I text her to check in to see okay, 'where are we at?' 'The doctor hasn't come in yet.' 'Okay. Did they check you?' 'No, they're waiting for the doctor to come.' 'Okay. Well, keep me posted. I'm gonna check on you, I'll give you 30 minutes or an hour.' So 10 o'clock I think I text her back and said, 'Okay, Did the doctor arrive yet?' No.*

**In the early afternoon., April sounds frustrated, saying she doesn't understand why they brought her to the hospital this early. She told Stanis they finally checked her and she was dilated 6 centimeters. The doctor was nowhere to be seen.**

*Askew: 'If she told you she was coming at 7:00 in the morning and now we're at 1:30 in the afternoon, and she hasn't arrived and you've asked and then the staff is saying we can't call her, we don't want to get cussed out...what? Okay! So she just voices how frustrated she was at that point. I'm like 'okay, so (stay) calm, affirmations, remain positive, remember what we practiced. No, we got thrown kind of some curveballs here but you're handling it well. You're doing the best... just keep remaining doing what you're doing.' Then she just went radio silent.*

**For several hours, Stanis' repeated texts and phone calls went unanswered. When April's phone was silenced, the doula thought maybe April was giving birth. But when Stanis still got no response by 9 p.m., she feared that something was wrong.**

**Finally, at 11 p.m., she got a call from April's phone.**

*Askew: And I'm like April! And her sister says 'No. Stanis, it's not good.' I said 'okay. Like what happened?' She says 'April died.' All I can say was at that point I literally grabbed*

*my heart and say 'my sincerest condolences. What can I do for you all?' Because you can't now question, but if they want to share (they) share, but this very moment, 'what can I do?'*

*And her sister then proceeds to tell me her perspective of it and what happened and then I remember asking like being in such like a shock state asking, 'What about the baby?' And she was so (inaudible) she didn't respond. So I'm like 'do you want me to come?' 'No, we'll keep you posted.'*

*It was just a moment of Okay, gather yourself. And now, how do we proceed? So for me, I hadn't had a statistic. But the reason I got into this was because of the statistics, and I was aware of them.*

**Stanis was shocked because April had a healthy pregnancy throughout. She hadn't complained of any unusual symptoms in the days leading up to her birth or in any communications with her.**

*Askew: So what April wasn't telling me was the pain she was in and when it started. She was expressing to me her frustrations, but then when I speak to the family afterwards, it was (that) she started feeling pain in her legs 30 minutes after the epidural was administered.*

**That's a sign of a possible blood clot.**

*Askew: So from the knowledge that I do have I know that's related. Family members may not... Had I been allowed access, I can advocate to the family to say they need to check her legs, they need to check this. From what I've been told, the nursing staff didn't even look at her. They never looked at her legs. She complained and stated over and over, 'I'm in pain.'*

*'You had an epidural. You can't be a pain.'* So there's a clue for you there, something's wrong.

**After April passed out, Stanis was told by Nigha that he himself had to perform CPR on April in an effort to revive her because the medical staff froze. When the doctor finally arrived, she had to perform an emergency C-section to save the baby.**

*Askew: The father, not only did he have to give CPR to April to (try to) revive her, and then ... he has to tell the doctor, 'get my baby. She's gone. Get my baby.'*

*So, and then witness as you're rolling down the hallway to go to an OR room. You hear the doctor screaming, 'give me the knife, just give me the knife' and witness the cut and pulling the baby out.*

*So the baby survived, but was on a breathing tube, a feeding tube, the first three days of her life.*

*And had he not been the advocate that he had been, the baby would not have survived either.*

**Stanis later learned that it was a blood clot that had traveled from April's legs to her lungs, which is treatable. But Nigha and April were reportedly told it was normal to be experiencing pain, even though an epidural is supposed to greatly reduce that pain.**

*Askew: So if someone says 'my leg hurts,' look at it. If nothing else, take a look.*

**The state's Department of Public health recommended in mid-2021 that that a doula be allowed to be present in a hospital room when prior arrangements with the hospital have been made, in addition to two support people.**

**The hospital where April died told LAist.com that patients are permitted two visitors in addition to a doula.**

**So why was April told that her doula Stanis would not be allowed in?**

**Stanis said that maybe hospitals need to employ doulas to ensure that patients have the support and advocacy that they often desperately need.**

**April Valentine died on Jan. 10 at the hospital at the age of 31. Today, Stanis is still grappling with her sorrow over April's death.**

*Askew: It's devastating. It's truly, truly devastating, and I know she doesn't fault me or blame me. But there is a part of me that felt guilty... but ... because I am certified in the credentials that I do carry, I do also carry an oath to obey the hospital rules. So if they say we're not allowing you in, but I go and cause a ruckus, so it puts you in a really hard spot. So for me, it was a very, well, 'could I go, is there someone else that's in labor,' how do I figure...It's a mind game.*

**The California Department of Public Health, which oversees hospitals and investigates complaints against them, declined to discuss their active investigation of the incident but said they're "deeply saddened by what happened to April Valentine and her family and can assure all Californians that our public health team is committed to reducing disparities in maternal health outcomes." Their licensing team also works with hospitals across the state to help ensure they have the needed tools and resources to keep all patients safe, a spokesperson said. Code WACK! will continue to follow this story.**

Meanwhile, the family of April Valentine has retained a lawyer and a GoFundMe page has been set up to establish a trust fund for baby Aniya, who will grow up without her mom.

Thank you, Stanis Askew.

*Do you have a personal story you'd like to share about our 'wack' healthcare system? Contact us through our website at [heal-ca.org](http://heal-ca.org).*

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