

Parents feel weight of pandemic

By **BRENNA VISSER**
The Bulletin

Just about everything that could go wrong did go wrong for Erica Kite when the coronavirus pandemic began. First, she was let go from her job for electing to stay home out of fear of how COVID-19 could affect her pregnancy. She filed for unemployment, but her payments were delayed — a delay that ended up lasting nearly a year.

And then, just about a week before Kite was supposed to have her baby, the well on her La Pine property ran dry, leaving her and her family of three without water just a few days before the arrival of her new daughter.

Despite the challenges, the 38-year-old said she wouldn't change a thing. The pandemic reminded her of something valuable: Nothing is more important than family, and her family is more resilient than she thought.

"We're kind of ready for whatever comes in the future. Hopefully, that was the worst of it we're going to see in our lifetime," Kite said. "It's kind of like, we can survive anything at this point."

A year ago, as the pandemic seemed to grow unchecked, The Bulletin spoke with nearly a dozen mothers about their experiences with pregnancy. A year later, The Bulletin followed up with three of those mothers.

Parenting in a pandemic, they say, meant struggling with isolation.

It meant having to say "no" to their children more often to things that should be "yeses," and sometimes not feeling like they were parenting the best they could.

It meant learning to get creative, and doing things they may have not had time for before the pandemic.

Most of all, the pandemic meant these mothers had extra time with their newborns — time that usually would not be afforded to them if things were normal.

"I think a lot of people feel the way I do," Kite said. "I don't think I'm unique in feeling this (pandemic) recalibrated what's important."

Since April 2020, more than 2,000 babies have been born at St. Charles Bend, according to Kristina Menard, the director of Women and Children's Services for St. Charles Health System. Despite national reports of birth rates declining, the hospital has not seen a significant increase or decrease in the number of births in central Oregon, Menard said in an email.

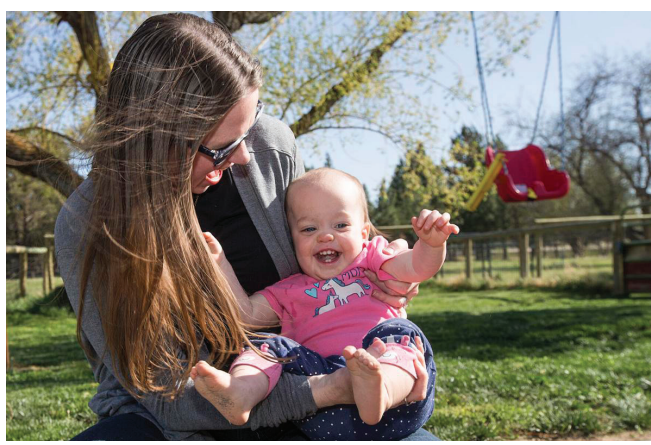
The hospital has seen an increase in planned home births since the beginning of the pandemic, however.

"We do not have any data to explain the increase, but it does correlate with the start of the pandemic and is likely related," Menard wrote in an email.

Madeline Drescher was one of the mothers who gave birth at home, to her daughter Mae in late May.

The pandemic put stress on both her personal and professional life. At the beginning of the pandemic, Drescher worked as a Doula — a person who is trained to offer emotional and physical support to women going through childbirth.

But after local hospitals restricted the number of people who could be in a hospital



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Leslie Neugebauer and her daughter, Lyla, 1, laugh while playing in their backyard.

room to one, Drescher's business suffered. Mothers were forced to choose between their spouse and their doula, and often chose the spouse.

She has mixed feelings about having to shut down her business.

"I'm relieved that I get to spend more time with my family and not be on call for the first time in six years, but also very sad because it's a huge part of me and what I love to do," Drescher said.

With four kids at home, the 34-year-old Bend resident faced new challenges in parenting that she hadn't before in raising her older children. She felt bad for constantly having to say no to what otherwise would be reasonable requests to go to the park or the library.

Instead of taking all of her children to the store — something she used to enjoy before the pandemic — she had to learn how to either go alone or with just a couple of her children, fearing how she would be perceived bringing more people into a store than was recommended in a pandemic.

She still worries about

how the isolation and lack of social contact will affect the development of her younger children.

"So much about how we interact as an adult we learn when we are kids," she said.

The pandemic did encourage both Drescher and her children to be more creative. With traditional entertainment avenues shut down for much of the pandemic, Drescher and her family were forced to ask: What can we do at home for fun?

More books were read at home. More time was spent playing with children and getting their hands dirty in the backyard. Her older children set up small neighborhood stands to sell geodes they found, or plant starts they had grown in the garden.

"It just reminds me there is still beauty in the world," Drescher said. "It's really easy to focus on the doom and gloom, but my kids are over here looking at frogs and worms and it reminds you there is still a beautiful world going on."

For Leslie Neugebauer, raising a newborn in the pandemic felt like every decision

she made had higher stakes than decisions she had previously made.

"When you are a parent, you question every decision you make," Neugebauer said. "Now it's even more so."

Neugebauer, a 40-year-old Bend resident, was faced with questions about whether it was safe to send her older child to preschool, or her newborn to daycare.

She too fears how a lack of socialization will affect her baby, Lyla, who just recently turned 1. Lyla has rarely gotten sick — an uncommon phenomenon in normal times — and Neugebauer fears what that will mean for her immune system down the line.

"She's only met a fraction of the people the older kid has met," Neugebauer said. "What's going to happen in two, three, four years for kids who have never been sick? That's a consequence I never thought of."

And having a baby during a government shutdown and stay-at-home orders meant getting little to no support to help take care of her older son in the weeks following Lyla's birth.

"He watched more TV in that one month than he did in his entire life," Neugebauer said. "And I felt terrible, but it also felt like I had no other option."

But the pandemic did bring some positives. Working from home meant not having to pump breast milk in the office during the day, which was a relief, she said. Neugebauer is also grateful for how working from home allowed her to get extra time to bond with Lyla.

"Every time I imagined how hard it was for me, I imagined how much harder it

could have been," she said. The first time Kite took her daughter Olive to a grocery store, someone there called her "one of those pandemic babies."

At first, Kite found the comment rude — a reminder of the negative marker her daughter will always have when someone asks for her birth date.

But it is also a reminder of something positive: Even in a year as awful as 2020, something good came out of it.

"It was such a tough year and so many bad things happened, but we ended up with this beautiful baby girl," Kite said.

With her unemployment payments delayed, Kite and her husband survived on receiving government issued food assistance and financial assistance from Neighbor Impact to help pay their electrical bills. The mortgage of their La Pine home was deferred due to COVID-19. The well that ran dry the week Olive was born was fixed thanks to an emergency loan from Neighbor Impact.

Despite the challenges, her family never went without basic necessities, Kite said.

"All in all, I think we were really fortunate," she said.

The greatest lesson of the pandemic involved perspective, Kite said. Obligations that used to matter just seem silly now after a year of quarantine.

Instead, Kite remembers doing things like getting dressed up in overalls, turning on music and having a dance party in the living room.

"It's not ideal it took a pandemic to force that, but it definitely made us appreciate having a family," Kite said.

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HWWT: STSX GSMTOQ.
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Today's Cryptoquip Clue: U equals C

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G I T T J B U I B , Q I J T U S C L G M Y Y
U L M B M Y L M W Z I U .

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Today's Cryptoquip Clue: U equals I

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