

Q&A: Linda Villarosa on her inside look at maternal mortality

By Alexis Green

When Linda Villarosa, contributing New York Times Magazine writer, showed up to her soccer game, she didn't expect to hear about the high rates of maternal mortality rate affecting black women. Villarosa realized what she once thought of as a problem that couldn't possibly be an issue within the developed U.S. healthcare system, hit very close to home. In New York city, her place of residence, the mortality rate is worse than the national trend with black women being approximately 12 times more likely to almost die from giving birth. I sat down with Villarosa to discuss her experience writing, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis."

How did your story on maternal mortality come about?

I cover the intersection between health and race. I also play soccer and a woman on my team said she had a really good story for me about maternal mortality. I told her I only write about the US and she told me this is a U.S. problem, which was surprising.

I went to a conference for doulas and met Latona Giwa and women from the Center of Reproductive Rights. Giwa, then, introduced me to Simon Landrum who's had everything bad that could happen to you as mother happen to her. I talked to Simon and was moved by her story and agreed to come back. I was there for 10 days and when she had the baby.

Speaking of Simon, the story features many of her traumatic experiences, including her experience with abuse and losing her child. How do you build trust and relationships with sources to tell such an intimate story?

I am not a New Yorker—I grew up in Colorado. My true Mid Western self is softer and that's the personality I use when interviewing sources. I also don't usually approach someone myself and bring in someone trusted, like Giwa. Lastly, I try to find someone who wants to tell the story and to be heard.

As an African-American woman reporting on predominantly minority issues, do you worry people will think you report with a bias or motive?

White people write stories about white people a lot, so I don't feel a need to explain myself. I was once asked if I feel pigeon-holed, and I do sometimes, but I write about what I care about. That is the natural way of finding stories.

You chose to include your personal experience with pregnancy in this story. When do you decide to step away as the writer and become a source for a topic?

I usually fight against putting myself in stories. This is petty, but when I first started writing this, I knew ProPublica was doing a series on maternal mortality and they could do everything faster. I asked myself what I could do to make my story different and decided to put myself in the story.

When Simone had a baby, she was upset because she didn't have her kids with her, so I went to pick them up. I kept it vague because I didn't want people to know I was the driver, until my editor told me readers needed to know who the driver was.

What were some of the difficulties you encountered writing this piece?

I was nervous about telling the story knowing people would judge the mother for her economic story, abusive partner, and the number of kids she had. I included myself to show this isn't about poor women, rather it's about black women.

Another issue was people wanted to leave out their names. I interviewed a well-off woman with doctor contacts in both of her phones. She did everything right and went in for delivery, but the last thing she remembers was waking up with hysterectomy. I couldn't fully tell the story that story without including her name.

What's was the best part of your experience writing this story?

After Kingston, Landrum's son, was born I got to hang out with him. I'm going back this Friday because I love the family. Members of the Doula Initiative also came back to New York for a conference and stayed at my place. Someone in my class asked me if I had any boundaries and I said no.

What is the importance of covering issues effecting the black community?

I try to find something surprising. A lot of the stories like this don't get told and when they do it's in a simplistic way.

I have the experience and am constantly thinking of how to untangle race and health issues. I feel a responsibility to do it because I can and am fortunate to have a platform like New York Times Magazine to tell my story.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Dell how many people are in the program

Why and what you're doing programs for students of color