

ON a bright sunny Sunday morning in late June 2024, Adam Boyle was in the backyard of his home in Atlanta, Georgia, with his two small children, when he got a phone call from his dad. There was good news, his dad told him, Adam's sister Naomi had just given birth to a healthy baby boy back in their home town of Dundalk.

But there'd also been some complications. He didn't have all the details, but Naomi was in an ambulance on her way to the nearest hospital. There was a lot of bleeding was as much as he could tell him.

Adam says he instinctively knew the worst had happened, that the home birth Naomi had insisted on had gone drastically wrong.

There were two or three more phone calls that morning from his dad, with updates on how Naomi was doing.

'It was looking worse and worse,' Adam says quietly. 'About two hours later, after that first phone call, he told me she'd passed. It was... truly awful.'

Naomi James, an exceptionally 'loving and generous' 38-year-old mother of four, died in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda after giving birth at home, where she'd suffered a postpartum haemorrhage. It's been reported that it took between 45 minutes and an hour to get her to hospital after the ambulance was called.

There had been no medical professional in attendance when Naomi gave birth at her house in Dundalk. After being refused the option of a home birth because of 'several high-risk factors' related to her pregnancy and previous births, she had chosen to 'freebirth'.

While Adam does not know exactly what happened during his sister's labour, he does know that she had become disillusioned with conventional maternity services after the hospital births of her first three children – a now seven-year-old daughter, and three-year-old twin boys.

He believes she was 'radicalised' by extreme online influencers who promote the practice of 'freebirthing', which involves a woman avoiding medical assis-

'Information being shared by the movement is often reckless'

tance during labour. It's a decision often made after a past negative experience of a hospital birth, or because they want more bodily autonomy.

'I think Naomi had been persuaded and persuaded herself that she would be OK,' says Adam. 'I'm not saying no one should have a home birth, I think there are instances where it is safe, and can be a wonderful way to give birth.'

'But the information being shared by the freebirth movement is often reckless. From my reading of it, all too often they're communicating the idea that it is always the safest option and that only in the rarest of instances it's not, and that is misinformation.'

This week, after a year-long investigation into 'freebirthing', the UK's Guardian newspaper published a series of arti-

Strong bond:
Adam and Naomi larking about in 2017



by Jenny Friel

cles about the Free Birth Society (FBS), an organisation founded and run by former doula and birth influencer Emilee Saldaya, who is based in North Carolina in the US.

Set up in 2017, it runs a podcast that's been downloaded more than five million times and a YouTube channel with almost 25 million views. Pushing the radical ideology of giving birth without medical assistance has proved lucrative as well as controversial. The Guardian exposé estimates that FBS has possibly made more than €11 million so far from courses, retreats and paid-up memberships.

Thanks to Naomi's social media activity and the many conversations they had together, Adam knows that his sister had been consuming great swathes of information about freebirthing.

There's also evidence on Instagram that she may have listened to an FBS podcast recommended to her by a doula – which, according to the Doula Association of Ireland's website is 'a professional, non-medical companion trained in the needs of the family' and who 'provide clients with continuous support during pregnancy, labour and birth, and the postpartum period'.

During this podcast episode, entitled The Freebirther's Guide to Haemorrhage with Yolande Norris-Clark, Saldaya claims to have seen 'tonnes of haemorrhage manufactured in the hospital' due to unnecessary interventions, but says she has never seen a haemorrhage in a freebirth.

'I have never once, not one time, seen or heard of a situation where a mother died from any complications at home, but specifically we're talking about blood loss,' she says.

To hear dangerous declarations like these now must be particularly

Extreme online influencers convinced my sister to try the 'freebirth' that killed her

Adam Boyle's sister Naomi had two arduous labours before deciding to try one without medical intervention, a growing and controversial practice that had the worst possible outcome

galling to Adam and his family, given the circumstances of Naomi's death just three months later. Although he has lived in the US for the last ten years, Adam regularly kept in contact with Naomi, speaking to her about once a week, often for hours at a time, right up until her death.

While he knew she was unhappy with the maternity services she'd used before, he didn't know if she was planning a freebirth.

During their last conversation on the topic, she told him she'd found an obstetrician-gynaecologist who was 'going to allow her labour at home and then bring her into the hospital' for the actual birth.

'I was concerned about even that, knowing the risks involved,' he says. 'I did know she had a doula, she went to one of her retreats, but I don't

know if she's part of the US crowd [FBS].'

He points to the podcast episode about haemorrhaging that the doula recommended to Naomi via Instagram.

'That was the kind of information she was getting from the people she thought she could trust,' says Adam. 'These were the people who advised her on her maternal care.'

Naomi was 15 months older than Adam, they grew up with their parents, Hassan and Lucy Boyle, in Dundalk, surrounded by their large extended family.

'Mum is one of 14 and my dad is one of 11,' he says. 'So there's an innumerable amount of cousins on both sides, we're a very, very close family.'

It was an idyllic childhood, he says, and their father was the pastor of a local church, which added to their strong sense of community. It's through the

church and Adam that Naomi met her husband, Michael James.

'Mick's originally from South Africa, he's been living in Ireland since he was ten,' explains Adam. 'He was a member of our church and became one of my best friends, we were in a band together, he's an incredibly talented musician.'

Adam says it 'didn't come as a surprise' when Naomi and Mick got together.

'I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome,' says Adam.

Shortly after their wedding, Naomi was pregnant with their first child, a little girl. After some fertility issues, she was pregnant again a few years later, this time with twins.

From his conversations with her, Adam knows she felt deeply traumatised by both births, especially her first.

'She had clear plans and wanted to avoid a Caesarean



Close relationship: Adam Boyle with his sister Naomi at his wedding in 2016 and, above, holding his sister's hand as youngsters

section if she could,' he says. However, it was a 'long and arduous labour' and resulted in a C-section.

'I don't know if it was right or wrong,' says Adam. 'But her perspective was that there was unnecessary intervention and it traumatised her. From that moment on, when she thought about her next birth she wanted to be in more control, know her options and advocate for herself.'

Because of her experience, Adam believes 'she opened herself up to some voices that I personally don't think were the right voices to listen to'.

He continues: 'We talked frequently about that. I had concerns about some of the online influencers, ones she'd repost or like on Facebook or Instagram.'

Although determined to have more control during her second delivery, Adam says Naomi 'still didn't get the experience she wanted'.

'It was another C-section,' he says. 'I'm not sure there was the

same level of trauma [as the first], but she would have said she felt betrayed, that's how she felt.'

Her 'journey towards freebirth' he says, began in around 2020.

'I started to see a shift in her perspective, she was much more

'I don't think anything could have changed her mind'

vocal, had strong opinions on things she didn't have before,' he explains. 'It all contributed to the sowing of doubt about the medical system.'

While they disagreed on some

of these beliefs, he says they never fell out.

'We could have a difference of opinion and talk it out for hours,' he says. 'But we'd always end on, "I don't agree with you, but I love you." I'm glad for that.'

Her online activity also continued to worry him.

'I did see her amplify certain influencers that gave me concern,' he says.

While some extreme freebirthers opt out of all conventional prenatal care, even when pregnancies and births become complicated, Adam doesn't think Naomi did that with her third pregnancy.

'She wanted to control the environment as much as possible, but not to the exclusion of any prenatal care,' he says. 'Very early on she indicated she'd like to do a home birth, but she wasn't eligible for that.'

'It was a high-risk pregnancy, for multiple reasons. Number one she'd had two previous C-sections, she was also overweight so her health would have

been a concern there, and she was 38.'

Naomi made the decision to give birth at home without the assistance of any doctor, midwife or nurse. Adam was unaware of the full details.

His last conversation with her was on a Friday, two days before she went into labour.

Their mum had travelled back to Dundalk to be there with her, and Naomi phoned Adam to ask him to stop calling to check how she was doing.

'I think she knew she was doing something risky,' he says.

He adds: 'I thought she was going to do as much of the labour as she could at home and then go into the hospital, I thought she was getting support to make sure that happened. I didn't know she was planning to freebirth without a qualified medical professional there.'

There is no data available for the rate of unassisted medical births in Ireland. The CSO only records 'domiciliary births' that are attended by midwives, which account for about 0.5 per cent of all deliveries here each year. However, anecdotal evidence has been reported, via online forums, of a rise in freebirths. Practitioners are often advised to keep quiet about their choices, for fear of interference.

Adam says his family talk about Naomi all the time.

'We all had our concerns,' he says. 'And we all voiced them in our own ways, based on our relationships with her. But at some point, you have to know that she's going to make a decision, and we have to support her. We can't dictate to her, she has to feel supported by us.'

He admits they have regrets and have discussed what else they might have said to Naomi to help dissuade her from the course of action she took.

'But I don't think there's anything that could have changed her mind,' he says. 'She was pretty far down the road in trusting the voices she gave weight to on that particular subject.'

Adam has done a huge amount

of research around the freebirth movement since losing his sister. It's taken until this week before he felt ready to speak publicly about the nature of her death.

'I want to ensure another family doesn't experience the same loss,' he says. 'I want people to be more sceptical about the information they're getting from these online influencers.'

He also points out how algorithms push the same extreme content from the same kind of people and organisations, which reinforces these dubious beliefs.

You can sense the deep regret he still holds over some of his conversations with Naomi. He says he's come to realise that

'I'm compelled to stop other families going through this'

sometimes when people disappear down a 'rabbit hole of misinformation', it's not just about the 'logical' but there's also a 'really important emotional component', often triggered by a 'bad experience'.

His advice for those who find themselves in a similar situation with a loved one, is to give them 'emotional validation', not just bombard them with the 'logical' facts. 'When I look back at my own story, I think maybe I didn't validate enough,' he says.

If there's some light to be taken from their story it's that Naomi's youngest son, who is now just 18 months old, is healthy and thriving.

'Mick is an absolutely brilliant dad, I've been back to Dundalk four or five times since Naomi died,' he says. 'He's one of my best friends as well as being my brother-in-law, and he's so capable of providing a loving and safe environment for his kids.'

It could possibly have been easier for Adam to say nothing publicly about his sister's death.

'I feel compelled to prevent other families from going through the same thing,' he says. 'There's no way of knowing if Naomi had been in a hospital if things would have been different. But I firmly believe her chances would have been exponentially better.'