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Description

On the 20th anniversary of her dramatic televised rescue, Jessica McClure talks about her life after being "Baby Jessica", the 18-month-old infant who fell down an abandoned well in Midland, Texas.

Keywords

Baby Jessica, Jessica McClure, Jessica McClure Morales, Rescue, Rescuers, Rescue Workers, Infant, Toddler, Well, Shaft, Casing, Tunnel, Drilling, Accident, Pump, Pipe, Midland, Texas, Media Circus, Journalism, Media, Coverage, Breaking News, Retrospective, Survivor, Drama, Ordeal, Surgery, Interview, Scars, Memory, Memories, Caring, Anniversary

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APA

CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

Transcript
Baby Jessica, 20 Years Later
MATT LAUER, co-host:
Now to an exclusive interview 20 years in the making. Back in 1987, the world held its breath as rescuers in Midland, Texas, worked desperately to free a toddler who'd fallen into a well. The former Jessica McClure, now Jessica Morales, is going to speak out in her first live TV interview ever in just a couple of moments. But first, a look back at one of the most memorable news events in recent history.
Her name is Jessica Morales, but millions of Americans would remember her simply as Baby Jessica.
JESSICA MORALES: It makes me feel lucky that I survived it and happy that I did, that I can come back here 20 years later and say, "Hey, it couldn't cage me then, why should it cage me now?"
LAUER: Then was October 1987 and it was a 22 foot abandoned well in her aunt's backyard. Left unattended for just a few minutes, the then 18-month-old Jessica wandered toward the eight-inch-wide exposed hole and fell in. That set off a nationally televised drama that gripped the nation.
DAN MOLINA (File footage): It's now been just about two full days since little Jessica slipped through an eight-inch pipe opening and fell to a ledge some 22 feet underground.
LAUER: Rescuers eventually drilled a vertical shaft parallel to the well and then bored a horizontal tunnel through solid rock to reach Jessica. Since her rescue, Jessica has had 15 surgeries, but she remembers nothing of her 58-hour ordeal.
Ms. MORALES: I haven't been here in years.
LAUER: Today Jessica is a 21-year-old married mother of a baby boy not much younger than she was when she emerged from darkness into the spotlight of instant fame.
Ms. MORALES: Can you imagine a baby this big fitting into something that small?
LAUER: And two decades after her amazing rescue, Jessica remains grateful to those who saved her.
Ms. MORALES: I mean, all I can say is thank you. I mean there's really--there are no words that can describe how thankful I really honestly am unless you know me and you live my life with me.
LAUER: And we're joined now by Jessica Morales. Hi, Jessica. How you doing?
Ms. MORALES: Hello, how are you?
LAUER: I'm doing fine. I'm sure there are a lot of people looking at the screen right now saying, "Let me get a good look at the girl I prayed for some 20 years ago." So as they take that good look, let me ask why you have stayed so far under the radar over these 20 years, why you haven't really sat down to do an interview like this?
Ms. MORALES: Well, it was more for a security purpose than anything.
LAUER: Just didn't want your face to be out there and so people could figure out exactly who you were?
Ms. MORALES: Yes. And I was in school still and that was better that I wasn't in the public while I was in school.
LAUER: You know, I think some people watching may have felt that once you were taken out of the well 20 years ago that all of your physical challenges were over. But that wasn't the case at all. You've had some real physical--kind of a physical ordeal, haven't you?
Ms. MORALES: Yes. I've had problems with my foot. I wasn't able to play sports in high school or anything like that. But other than that I've lived a well productive life.
LAUER: Fifteen surgeries, though, nine blood transfusions, six-week stay in the hospital, and you still have quite a few scars, don't you?
Ms. MORALES: Yes, I do.
LAUER: You--and if you can maybe just show us one of the scars that's most prevalent. You made a conscious decision not to have it removed through plastic surgery. How come?
Ms. MORALES: Well, it shows who I am and the fact that I am here and that I could have not been here.
LAUER: Which of the scars is--you have one on your face? Is that right--on your forehead?
Ms. MORALES: Yes, I have one on my forehead. And you can't really see it, but it's right about here.
LAUER: I am not going to...
Ms. MORALES: It's gone away a lot.
LAUER: Yeah. It seems like it's not as prevalent as I thought it was going to be. I'm not going to ask you what you remember from your time in the well because, 18 months old, you clearly don't remember anything. But it was interesting. We showed that video, Jessica, of you going back to the well for the first time with our crew. What was it like to see it first-hand?
Ms. MORALES: It was kind of weird. Everybody who had ever been there had seen that and known what was going on. And for me to come back 20 years later, it was a little difficult because I had no earthly idea anything of what had ever really honestly had happened there.
LAUER: We mentioned in the piece, Jessica, that you're 21 years old now. You have an 11-month-old son. You're happily married. You're very happy in your life. Do you hate when people refer to you as Baby Jessica?
Ms. MORALES: No, because like they told Lil' Bow Wow, you'll never get rid of the little part because you'll always be what you are remembered as.
LAUER: I understand that there was some teasing that went along. And actually, I don't know, some of it may be good natured ribbing. But actually it exists to this day. Recently you were walking, you tripped over a curb, and some guy looked at you and said, "You still haven't learned how to watch your step' or
something like that?
Ms. MORALES: Yes. I was at Cheddar's, and I stepped off the curb. And a little old man said that to me. He said, `You are the baby that fell in the well. Right?' And I said, `Yes, sir.' And he said, `Well, I thought you'd learned how to watch your step when you were two years old.'
LAUER: And there was a young boy, I understand, through an early part of your school, even into maybe high school, who used to refer to you in an unflattering way. He called you the well-dweller. Do you want to quickly tell me what happened to him?
Ms. MORALES: Oh, a friend of mine punched him.
LAUER: That will get him to stop, I would imagine. Hey, on the anniversary...
Ms. MORALES: Yes.
LAUER: On the anniversary of this, when it comes up, the five-year anniversary, the 10-year anniversary and now the 20, I understand the media gets pretty aggressive. Is it true that the press broke into or walked into the school library so they could steal a copy of the yearbook and get a photo?
Ms. MORALES: Yes, they did. And the only reason why we figured out they had was because it hit the Midland Reporter-Telegram before it hit anywhere else. And my mom was not very happy about that. At the time, they didn't have a good lock on the back door, and it was during school hours. And so they walked in through the back door, grabbed the first yearbook they found that they thought I might would be in in that year, and took it out and put it--put my yearbook picture on the front of the Midland Reporter-Telegram.
LAUER: Oh. And by the way, after you got out of that well, I would imagine your mom became pretty overprotective--probably wanted to wrap you in bubble wrap. Are you now, with your son, an overprotective mom?
Ms. MORALES: I am a little. I kind of get a little excited every time he gets a bump or a bruise. But I have learned that he's going to get many, and there's nothing I can really do about it, that he's going to fall down and he's going to bust his face open. And he's going to do it several different times and that I should just let him grow up.
LAUER: And we talked about how many people just watched, you know, absolutely gripped by what happened to you. A lot of those people donated money to a trust fund for you. And you've got that when you are 25 years old. Have you been able to explain to yourself why so many people cared about what happened to you back then 20 years ago?
Ms. MORALES: I explained to myself that I believe that people cared so much because they would hope that somebody would care that much about them and that, in a way, helping me out and caring about me helped them out.
LAUER: Well, it's good to see you. It's nice to see your face finally. Jessica McClure--I'll call you Jessica Morales, though. Thanks for doing the interview. I really appreciate it. And I hope everything goes well with you and your son.
Ms. MORALES: Oh, I hope it does too. He's a good boy.
LAUER: Good for you. All right. Take care. Be happy.