

Mothering the Mom

Doulas provide women with comfort, support during childbirth

By Stefanie Scarlett
The Journal Gazette

When Meagan Hindle was in labor with her first child in October, she was distracted by the noise and bustle in her hospital room.

The bright lights, the conversations, the door constantly being opened and shut, all made it difficult for her to focus on the task at hand.

Then Hindle's doula, Janis Chrissikos, took charge.

"I think she just sensed I was tense. She asked me how I was doing, and I said I don't think we're doing very well," Hindle, of Fort Wayne, says.

"She said, I think it's time we changed the mood."

Off went the harsh lights and on went the soft music. Voices became hushed as the scent of aromatherapy oils filled the air.

"Everybody could just tell, that's what we're doing now. It helped them focus on helping me," Hindle says.

Several hours later, Levi Hindle was born - with the help of certified nurse-midwife Andrea Yoder - as his father, grandmother, aunt and Chrissikos watched.

"Controlling the environment and setting the tone can go a long way to help a woman create her space to give birth," says Chrissikos, of Fort Wayne. "A woman will give birth best in an environment where she feels safe and comfortable."

Doulas, also called birth coaches or labor support providers, give physical and emotional comfort to moms and their partners, staying throughout labor and delivery. Unlike midwives, doulas don't deliver babies or provide medical care, but they share the philosophy that birth is a natural process and not a medical procedure.

Doulas are for anyone, Chrissikos says, not just for single moms or those whose partners can't be present at the birth. They can attend births at home, hospitals or birthing centers.

And their numbers are increasing. The non-profit organization Doulas of North America has seen its membership grow to nearly 4,500, up from 2,800 in 2000.

Doula services typically range from \$350 to \$500 and are not covered by health insurance. The fee generally covers one or two pre-birth meetings, labor support and delivery and at least one postpartum meeting.

Chrissikos, a registered nurse, forensic nurse examiner and childbirth educator, owns Bedside Manners: BirthWorks of Fort Wayne. She is pregnant with her fourth child.

The role of doulas reflect a time long gone, she says, when women gave birth at home, assisted by family, friends and neighbors. Most girls grew up witnessing birth, something that rarely happens in this country today.

"Women used to know these things. (But) women in our generation didn't grow up assisting other women. Women lost those skills," she says.

Today, most women labor and give birth in hospitals - where doctors are there only for the actual delivery and nurses always have other patients to care for as well.

But more women are seeking alternatives: birthing centers or home birth, midwives and doulas.

"Women are realizing that they have options - maybe the 'norm,' or what everybody else has done, doesn't work for them," says Sarah Ebert, who owns Noble Birth Doula Services in Kendallville. She is Chrissikos' doula.

Chrissikos agrees, saying the "medical marketplace has become more consumer-oriented," with more competition for patients and less insurance reimbursement. Patients want more personal care for their money as well.

That's where the hands-on midwives and doulas come into the picture.

"Both of us have a strong belief that birth works and that women's bodies know how to birth - and our best role is being supportive," midwife Andrea Yoder says. She has worked with Chrissikos several times.

"I think our roles are very complementary, the client can have a little more support. What one of us doesn't think of sometimes, the other one does, in terms of comfort or progress," she says.

Providing comfort is only part of the doula's job, Ebert says. Her role also includes acting as an advocate who can help facilitate communication between parents and hospital staff, make sure parents get their questions answered and that they understand the benefits and risks of any interventions, such as epidurals, inductions and monitoring.

"I want each mom to have her own choices. Whatever she wants, it's my job to help her get," she says.

"The best part is being able to nurture families and give them a great start in life and give them a good birth memory. I want women to look back on it and say that was a great experience."

Ebert and Chrissikos were moved to train as doulas after their own experiences giving birth.

That experience comes in handy for helping other women face each contraction, in the form of "wave" metaphors and other visual imagery, massage and counteracting pressure, breathing advice and suggestions for different birth positions.

Chrissikos' doula kit includes a birthing ball, massage tools, a rope (to pull on to balance the pressure) essential oils, CDs, hot packs, cold packs, hard candy, a hand fan, a mirror and other necessities.

These tools of the trade not only help the mom, but also the dad - in terms of showing him what to do, or letting him rest for a while, while the doula takes over massage duties.

Hindle's husband initially was wary about the idea of a doula, worried that she would replace his role. Now he's a fan of Chrissikos.

"She works at bringing the husband into the picture, telling him how to help you. She does not take his place," Hindle says.

Monique Hartle of Fort Wayne, who hired Chrissikos for the birth of her third child in October 2001, agrees.

"I think for a lot of dads . . . they're not sure what to do to help. She's very instrumental in keeping them involved."

When Hartle gave birth in 2001, it was her first time with a doula and her first home birth.

"If I could go back and have the first two again (with a doula), I would. It's such a wonderful experience. She definitely helped to make the atmosphere more welcoming for the baby," Hartle says.

And for mom.

"She's taking care of you, every need you could possibly have," Hindle says. "She's definitely mothering the mother."