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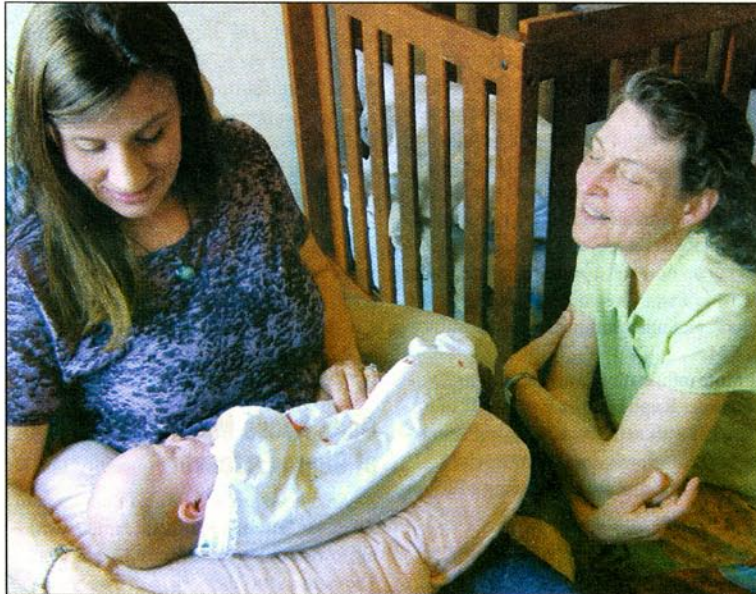
Madison area offers doulas to support new moms

By Angela Mihm Nigro, for Neighbors

In a world of fast moving health care, one event that moves at its own speed, with its own agenda, is labor and delivery. The long awaited birth of your precious bundle can be arduous and complicated. To ensure a positive birth experience, more and more couples are turning to doulas for assistance.

Meaning "woman's servant" in ancient Greek, a birth doula provides continuous physical (not medical), emotional and informational support to the mother before, during, and just after childbirth as defined by Doulas of North America (DONA). "My goal is to help each woman have the birth that she wants," Hannah Bernard-Donals, a Madison birth doula says.

Some women hire a doula because they want to take more responsibility for their health care and others utilize a doula for a more natural birth or to delay medication, says Amy L. Gilliland, M.S., CD (DONA). "A doula helps you remember to make requests of the clinical staff, provides relaxation and pain reduction techniques," Gilliland continues. Hannah says that her experience has been positive with Madison's medical staff, "with doctors and nurses welcoming the



Doula Hannah Bernard-Donals, right, confers with Leslie on care of her new daughter.

NEIGHBORS PHOTO BY DON KOSTERMAN

extra support."

Clinical studies indicate that a doula's presence at birth tends to result in shorter labors with fewer complications, reduces negative feelings about one's childbirth

experience, reduces the requests for pain medications, and reduces the likelihood of invasive delivery assistance like forceps, vacuum extraction or cesarean section, as found in a study published in the American

wellness edition

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Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, May 1999.

"A doula is the woman's advocate," Gilliland explains. A doula provides continuous care throughout labor including early support at home and usually an hour or two postpartum to assist with maternal bonding, breastfeeding, and any other concerns. "The doula shows up for you 100 percent," she continues.

Of course, many women have their spouse or partner in the delivery room for support. That role isn't always easy, however. "The evolution of fathers at birth has been a disservice to men in some ways," Gilliland says. It was as if society said, "you want to be in the delivery room, fine - then be useful. Men are expected to know everything a doula knows at the drop of a hat and to

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deny any part of their emotional experience," she continues. "A doula can help meet the emotional needs of the couple, providing loving care during labor so that they have the emotional reserves to give to the child."

Recognizing that not all women have the support of family and friends at their births, several South Central Wisconsin doulas started an organization called Small Miracles, which provides volunteer doula services to low income and incarcerated women. Through her research, Gilliland sees a need for community-based doulas with a demand for culturally sensitive, bi-lingual doulas increasing. "Latina women have the highest increasing rate of cesarean section deliveries in the nation.

In the 10 years that Gilliland has been training doulas, one trait remains consistent. The women "want to create positive birth experiences for mom, dad, and baby" and are "tremendously dedicated" to making that happen, she says. Doulas participate in

extensive self-study reading to prepare for the three-day intensive training and the at least 12 hours of childbirth education, Hannah says.

After the training, doulas must attend three births and obtain written feedback from the doctor, nurse, and mother in order to receive certification from DONA International. With ever-changing philosophies around labor and delivery, it is important to be a generalist and to have a broad base of knowledge about various childbirth techniques in order to help their clients, she continues.

Selecting the right doula for you requires research and self-reflection. After an initial interview, Hannah meets with the couple at least twice to extensively discuss their hopes, fears, and needs in addition to practicing pain management techniques and discussing what labor will be like. The relationship should "feel right to you" with the doula answering questions in a way that is thorough and useful to you, Gilliland explains. She also recommends that when selecting a doula, you should "feel safe with this



There are perks to Hannah's work as a doula.

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person. It is about a level of trust that is beyond words." ■

To learn more:

Doulas of South Central Wisconsin - to search for a doula and other resources. 245-0333, www.wisconsinindoulas.net

DONA International - complete with research papers, steps on selecting a doula, and information on becoming a doula. www.dona.org

Come "Meet the Doulas," June 3, 2007 at Whole Foods from 1 to 2:30 p.m.