

by **Kim Pleticha**
**Reaching Out to
Military Mamas**

20 of whom are in Texas (Texas accounts for about 1/16 of the total births the volunteer doulas attend). The organization requires volunteer doulas to complete an approved doula training course and be members of a professional birth organization or association. All doulas also must sign a code of conduct and ethics agreement, and agree to provide their services free of charge.

Austin-based doula Lisa Houser heard about Operation Special Delivery about a year ago. She had been a practicing doula for two years, specializing in women with high-risk pregnancies. Her background as a paramedic made her uniquely qualified to support women with complicated pregnancies. Still, she was hoping to branch out, to meet women with other needs she could fulfill. One day, while surfing in an online chat room, she read about Operation Special Delivery and felt an immediate connection.

"I said, 'Oh my God I can't believe this is happening—this is exactly what I'm looking for,'" she says.

Interestingly, Ms. Houser also was uniquely suited to work with Operation Special Delivery: her husband is retired from the Air Force.

"I understand the military mindset," she says, laughing lightly. Although said in jest, such knowledge can be crucially important: military wives are expected to endure the absence of their husbands and their family, and handle labor and delivery alone, without complaining. If their husbands are able to attend the birth, their military training often clashes with the needs of their laboring wife, causing friction in the delivery room. For these women, a doula who understands the military way of life can provide a calm and instructive liaison between the spouses during labor, facilitating a non-stressful experience. For women whose husbands cannot attend the birth, a doula who understands what is going through the laboring mother's mind is that much more prepared to ease her concerns.

Ms. Houser specifically recalls the first birth she attended as an Operation Special Delivery doula. It was the mother's third baby, but her husband was in Iraq and unable to attend the birth. His absence was particularly painful for the mother during transition, the most intense part of labor when the cervix dilates from 8 to completion.

"She kept saying 'I can't believe he's not here, I can't do it without him,'" Ms. Houser recalls. "So I read her his letters so that she would have the strength to carry on. It was so emotional, but there was so much strength—it was just the greatest experience ever."

PROVIDING STRENGTH

Mrs. Hartsough wasn't necessarily looking for the greatest experience ever, but she hoped it would be better than her first labor and delivery. Her husband, a nuclear-biological-chemical operations specialist, had attended that birth but his presence had not been comforting. Despite having had an epidural, Ms. Hartsough had been in intense pain: two metal rods in her back,

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What's a Doula, Anyway?

In Greek, the term "doula" means "trusted servant" or "woman's servant". Although most doulas are paid for their work, the description is still rather fitting.

A doula is a non-medical professional labor assistant who offers emotional, physical and sometimes spiritual support to a laboring or postpartum mother. Essentially, doulas fall into two categories: birth doulas and postpartum doulas. As the titles imply, birth doulas assist women through labor, while postpartum doulas help out after the baby has arrived. Doulas often say they "mother the mother" by providing comfort and encouragement. During labor this can take the form of massage, breathing techniques, and placing the mother in various positions to make labor less intense.

The use of doulas has gained in popularity in the past decade, thanks to numerous research studies that show women who have the assistance of a doula have shorter labors with fewer complications; a reduced need for pitocin to artificially augment labor; and less of a need for pain medication. Studies also suggest that the presence of a doula also tends to reduce the possibility of having a vacuum or forceps delivery or a Caesarian section.

But doulas aren't only helpful in the delivery room: they also act as information specialists throughout a woman's pregnancy. Pregnant women often don't realize that they are also medical consumers and that they have the right to ask questions and even change physicians halfway through the pregnancy if they are not satisfied with their care, says Austin-based doula Lisa Houser.

"As a doula, what I do is I make sure that the communication lines [between a woman and her doctor] stay open," Ms. Houser says. "I smooth the road for women [and] make sure they are receiving all of the information they need."

Like most professional doulas, Ms. Houser has relationships with many physicians. Despite this, she stresses that she is not a liaison: she works for the mother and advocates for the mother's needs.

Doulas also advocate for and meet the needs of other members of the birthing woman's family. During labor, they

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can guide a woman's partner in providing comfort measures, allowing the partner to be an active participant in both labor and delivery.

"If Dad is not in tune with what Mom needs, it's going to make her tense," Ms. Houser says. When a doula is in the labor room, however, "if Mom needs additional assistance, [Dad] can lean over and say 'what should I do?'—it's easier than grabbing a book and flipping through it."

Post partum doulas also offer important care. Many pregnant women focus so much on labor and delivery that they neglect to provide for their needs after the baby arrives. Post partum doulas assist by cooking meals for the family, washing laundry, and tending to the needs of the mother; they also offer an unbiased and understanding person with whom the mother can discuss her birth experience. While some might consider a post partum doula an unnecessary luxury, studies have shown that women who have the assistance of a professional post partum doula have better success at breastfeeding and a lower instance of post partum depression.

"Historically women were never left alone after birth—their needs were tended to, as were their family's needs. Today that role is not being fulfilled by family or community, in most cases, and a lot of people don't even know how to support a new mom," says Ryka George of The Mothering Way (www.TheMotheringWay.com), a group doula practice in Austin. "So there are so many nuances that a [post partum] doula brings to each family to help them through the transition, including getting Dads or partners acclimated to their new role in life."

In the past, doulas didn't receive any professional training. Now, however, most belong to one or more associations that not only provide training, but also professional development, ongoing education, and support. The four best known professional doula associations are DONA International (www.DONA.org), the Association of Labor Assistants & Childbirth Educators (www.ALACE.org), Childbirth International (www.ChildbirthInternational.org), and the Childbirth and Postpartum Professional Association (www.CAPPA.net). All four organizations have parental resources on their web pages, including a search engine to find a local doula.

When hiring a doula, parents should ask some specific questions, including what kind of education and training the doula has; what her credentials are; what her childbirth phi-

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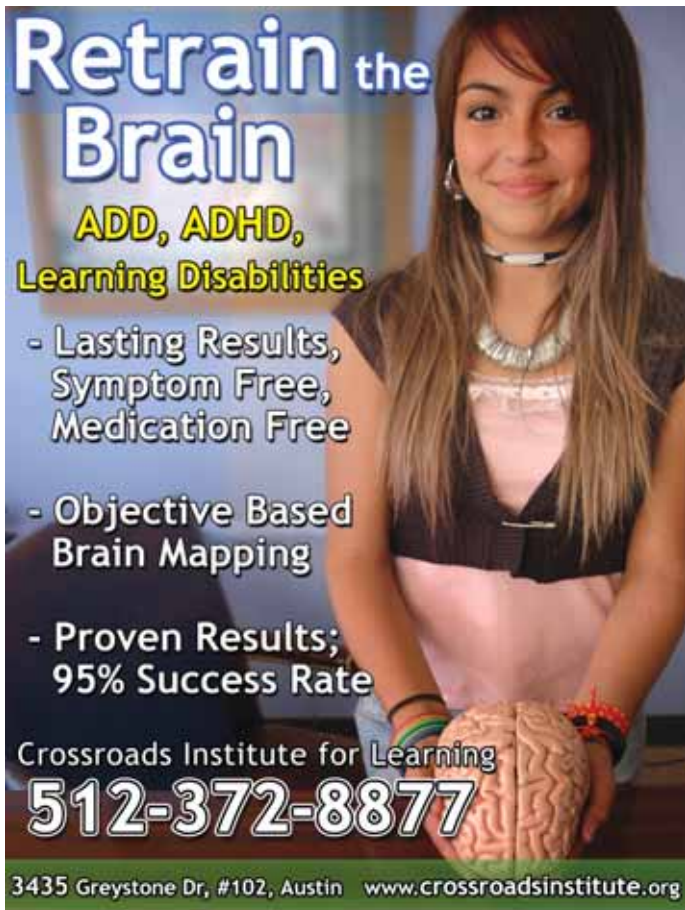
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osophy is; what services she offers; and what her fees are. Parents should interview several doula candidates, all in person, to determine how they feel about each one. Getting along with the doula is important: the mother has to trust her during one of the most vulnerable experiences of her life.

Generally speaking, Austin birth doulas charge between \$400 and \$1,200 for their services; some will charge less or even offer their services for free if they are in training. The fee usually includes one or two visits before birth, assistance during labor, and one or two post partum visits, plus phone support throughout pregnancy and the immediate postpartum period. Post partum doulas in Austin charge \$20 to \$25 an hour for one baby, which includes things like doing dishes and laundry, as well as preparing meals and other "sustainables"—in other words, things that "sustain" you while you recover from birth.

Doulas do not replace doctors, midwives or nurses; their position is strictly as an advocate for the mother. Individual doulas may differ in personality, technique and philosophy, but their overall purpose is the same: to assist mothers in having a beautiful birth experience.

"That's why we [doulas] are here," says Ms. Houser. "We want to make the birth experience more positive, regardless of the situation."

not only during labor but also after.

"Right now we're simply [acting as] the birth doula," Ms. Houser says. "But if there are doulas who are interested in doing post partum [work], that would really be useful."

As far as Mrs. Hartsough and Mrs. Haferkamp are concerned, "useful" doesn't begin to describe their Operation Special Delivery experience. Both say they encourage other pregnant military wives to take advantage of the program.

"I tell them to go for it, definitely," says Mrs. Hartsough. "It is a wonderful resource [and] it's free."

"[Lisa] was a lifesaver," echoes Mrs. Haferkamp. "This whole program was a godsend."

Kim Pleticha is the editor of Parent:Wise Austin magazine. She found out about Operation Special Delivery after seeing it advertised on a piece of paper stuck on a bulletin board outside of a health food store in Abilene.

Parent:Wise Austin wishes to thank Stefanie Hartsough and Shawna Haferkamp for allowing us to use candid photos of themselves and their husbands after the birth of their babies. Many thanks also to Alison Eden for her professional shots of Mrs. Hartsough and her children.



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