

Doulas provide support, encouragement during childbirth

by [Laura Gottesdiener](#) - Aug. 22, 2010 12:00 AM
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At midnight in the maternity ward of Mesa's Banner Desert Medical Center, Felicia Martinez started pushing in earnest. She had been in labor for nine hours. Merry Lynch, a certified doula who had been at her bedside since the beginning, knew she was exhausted.

Martinez was in pain, but she and Lynch were following the birth plan for a natural delivery - no pain medication - they had developed together at Maggie's Place, a shelter for pregnant women in the Valley. But as the night crawled by, Martinez wanted an epidural more and more.

As each contraction hit, Martinez held onto her mother, Doreen, or a metal bar. Everyone - nurses, doctor, doula and Doreen - yelled at her to push.

"I was getting so frustrated, because I wanted to tell Merry and my mom that they didn't know what this felt like. But they were both mothers, so they knew," Martinez said.

At one point, Martinez tried to pull herself out of bed to find an epidural for herself. But then another contraction hit, and when Lynch and Doreen said they could see the baby's head, Martinez knew there was no turning back.

At 4:04 a.m. on May 1, after 13 hours of

labor, Martinez gave birth to her first child, Lily Abigail, a healthy girl weighing 7 pounds exactly.

Why was it so important for Martinez to have a drug-free delivery? Because the 27-year-old is a recovering drug addict. She kicked a six-year, off-and-on meth habit when she found out she was pregnant. At the time of her labor, she'd been sober eight months, and she didn't want an epidural or another drug to alter her experience.

For Martinez, the modern problem of meth addiction led her to seek out an old-fashioned solution: a natural birth. That choice represents not only her journey, but also much of the story behind the resurgence of doulas in the United States. As today's health-care system becomes increasingly complicated and mechanized, more women are finding comfort and empowerment in this ancient tradition.

Doula, a Greek word for a woman's servant, is a mother's advocate throughout childbirth. Unlike a midwife, a doula is not medically licensed and does not perform medical care. The doula's primary role is to provide information and emotional support.

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During a delivery, a doula might comfort a woman by rubbing her back and feet, help her take a walk around the ward, explain medicines and choices and even support a soon-to-be father. In recent years, more Valley women have started turning to doulas.

"I wanted to feel like I was being supported throughout the birth process," said Marsha Jones, a mother of two in Glendale who used a doula for her second daughter's birth.

Jones felt hurt and frustrated by the sterile, hands-off treatment she received during her first delivery.

"During my first birth, I was in this room with all these people, but I felt like they were just watching me do everything. There was no coaching," Jones said.

For her second birth, she turned to a doula. Jones explained to her doula all the things she hadn't liked during her first labor.

"With a doula, I had the perfect birth experience. . . . She was always there, always having a personal connection to me. She was the rock in the room that kept me strong," Jones said.

Bobbi Sue Jojola, program director of Arizona Doula Organization and Birth Education Association, the largest doula-training organization in Arizona, estimates that 350 to 500 doulas practice in the Valley.

When the group began 15 years ago, there were almost none.

"Our numbers have increased immensely," said Jojola, who was one of a few women to attend the association's first doula-training session in 1995.

Both Jojola's group and international doula organization DONA International report steadily increasing membership over the past decade. Valley nurses have noticed the rise.

"I've seen more doulas in this hospital in the last two to three years than I have in the past," said Rakay Dance, a nurse at Banner Gateway Medical Center in Gilbert.

In a year of sweeping health-care reforms and state budget cuts, Valley doulas say that their services could help relieve an overburdened system.

Doulas are on their way toward possible insurance reimbursement; last October, the National Uniform Claims Committee assigned doulas an insurance-provider code, the first step to getting reimbursement.

Until that happens, doulas set their own rates. A certified birth doula charges an average of \$500 to \$750 for a birth in Arizona.

Lynch, 52, hadn't even heard the word doula

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until her daughter, Amaris, became pregnant three years ago. Lynch attended doula-training classes to help her daughter and began volunteering at Maggie's Place soon afterward.

The profession is unregulated, but for those who decide to become certified, like Lynch, the training averages a weekend's worth of seminar classes and role-playing exercises. Valley women can find a list of Arizona doulas and their credentials on the Internet.

At Maggie's Place, Lynch teaches classes on delivery and breast-feeding and offers doula services.

"The moms really enjoy (Lynch) because she is real," said Maria Eichhold, director of Michael's House, the Maggie's Place shelter where Martinez lived.

That was what attracted Martinez to Lynch last February. After nearly a decade of drug use, Martinez had been drug-free for five months, and she intended to stay that way.

Before Martinez's May 15 due date, she and Lynch met multiple times to discuss labor and envision the birth plan. Martinez prepared with the ice-bucket exercise, holding her hand in a bucket of ice for one minute to simulate the length and intensity of contractions. Lynch learned that Martinez rocks back and forth when in pain.

Deliveries are unpredictable, and doctors may be forced to abandon birth plans, which can become a sticking point between doulas and the medical establishment.

Althea Hrdlichka, a doula who specializes in assisting mothers after their children are born, has also assisted at more than 20 births. She said she receives mixed reactions

from Valley hospitals.

"A lot of times the initial response from staff is, 'They have a *doula*,'" Hrdlichka said. 'There's often a negative connotation with the word, because the staff thinks we're going to come against them. But in reality, we are just another person on the birth team.'

Nurse Dance has had both good and bad experiences with doulas throughout her 16 years of nursing. She said the problems arise when doulas try to carry their advocacy too far.

"They cannot interfere with the patient's ability to make decisions for medical care, because that would be a legal problem for us," Dance said.

Two weeks before Martinez's due date, obstetrician Ann Kimmel decided to induce labor because Martinez had pre-eclampsia, a common condition of hypertension during pregnancy. Martinez was reluctant to take Pitocin, used to induce contractions, until Lynch explained that it is a synthetic form of a hormone the body produces naturally - not a painkiller. Martinez took the Pitocin and

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started pushing.

Around 3 a.m., with no baby in sight, Martinez was told that if she didn't deliver soon she would need a Caesarean section. Nearly a third of births in the United States are now C-sections, according to a March report by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While Arizona ranks below the national average, C-sections, which are nearly twice as costly as vaginal births, account for more than a quarter of the live births in this state.

A 2003 study of nearly 13,000 women by international non-profit research group Cochrane Collaboration linked continuous labor support by a non-hospital employee to a 26 percent reduction in the rate of Caesarean sections.

"It makes sense for insurance companies to reimburse for our services, because studies have proven that women with doulas have fewer Caesareans, use less pain medicine and generate fewer costs for the hospitals," said Rose Day, another Valley doula.

However, Nancy Neff, a spokeswoman for Banner Medical Centers, said hospitals don't have firsthand data to support doulas' reduction of C-sections. Jennifer Carusetta, a spokeswoman for AHCCCS, the Arizona Medicaid provider, said the agency was not in a position to comment on the efficacy or potential savings that may be achieved from using doulas.

When doula Lynch heard the word C-section, she snapped into action.

"I was standing behind the doctor at that moment," Lynch recalled. "And I said, 'Felicia, you are going to spit this baby out right now.' "

Lynch helped brace Martinez's legs and watched as she delivered her healthy girl.

Martinez and Lily now live in a quiet neighborhood in Mesa. Martinez is eager to return to work as a waitress and hopes to become a drug counselor.

On a recent visit to Maggie's Place to bring Lynch photographs of Lily, Martinez was quick to tell current resident Angie Schwartz about her labor.

"I'm thinking I will do it natural, too," said Schwartz, 19, who was six months pregnant.

Lynch persuaded Schwartz to try the ice-bucket exercise.

"Are contractions a lot worse than that?" Schwartz asked afterward.

"Well, you shouldn't say that," Lynch said. "But what you can say is, 'A wonderful gift is coming after this contraction.' "

Schwartz was silent.

"I'm scared," she admitted.

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Lynch nodded. "That's OK."

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