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Birthing a business

Two local doulas help to ease the labor process

By Kate Antoniadis

When Christy Muscato gave birth to her first child, she had never heard the word “doula,” despite being what she calls “pretty crunchy and pretty holistic.” The term “doula” generally refers to a specially trained birth assistant who gives emotional, physical, and informational support to women (and their partners) during labor. Not long afterward, Muscato spoke to her naturopathic doctor and shared her disappointment with the experience of that first birth. She had hoped for a natural childbirth, but her daughter’s breech (head-down) position led to an unplanned C-section. In response, her doctor mentioned doulas and encouraged Muscato to become one.

Approximately six percent of women who give birth in U.S. hospitals hire a birth doula. Many do so to improve their chances of a nonmedicated labor and birth (although doulas provide support for all types of births). That assistance does not include performing medical procedures, making decisions for clients, or speaking to hospital staff on their behalf. “I often describe doulas as putty on the wall,” says Muscato. “We cover anything that needs to be filled in so it makes it smooth.” For instance, if a woman’s partner has been actively supporting her for hours but needs a quick nap, Muscato can step in.

Muscato, who is forty-two, and fellow doula Julia Sittig, forty-four, met eleven years ago while in training. Both women completed a rigorous certification process through DONA International, the largest and oldest doula organization, in order to become Certified Birth



From left, Christy Muscato and Julia Sittig

Doulas. In the years since then, Sittig and Muscato created the Doula Cooperative of Rochester, began training doulas themselves, and cofounded Beautiful Birth Choices (BBC), located at 1100 University Avenue. BBC offers childbirth and breastfeeding classes, prenatal yoga, sibling classes for kids, and a support group for new moms. Its five doulas provide clients with phone and

email support, monthly group info sessions on topics like cloth diapering, prenatal birth consultations, labor support (which includes a short period after the birth), lactation counseling, and a postpartum home visit. While those visits and meetings take place on a predictable schedule, it’s pretty much impossible to know the exact day a baby will arrive (except in cases of scheduled

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C-sections), or how long a baby will take to make an appearance once labor starts.

Both women feel grateful for their families' support of their chosen career, which is far from a 9-5 gig. Sittig and her husband live in Rochester's Maplewood neighborhood, and they have five kids aged eight through eighteen. The youngest four are currently homeschooled. "I've had to adopt the mantra, 'As long as I'm not at a birth...'" Sittig says. "Sometimes that means canceled playdates and rearranged plans and even putting relationships and special events on hold because I can't always commit."

When Sittig is away at a birth, her husband and mother keep things rolling, and her older kids help watch the younger ones. BBC's other four doulas are essential, she says; they can provide backup support if, for example, she's attending a birth that's taking longer than anticipated.

Muscato, who lives in Greece with her husband and two daughters, ten and twelve, says the unpredictable schedule was especially challenging when her kids were younger. "I wouldn't have been able to do it without my in-laws and my husband being able to be flexible with his schedule sometimes," she says. MetLife, where she works part time, also has been very willing to accommodate her schedule.

Doulas' educational backgrounds vary—Sittig has a master of social work (MSW), which is more than some. "Working in disadvantaged communities has been a big part of my life," she says, "so my MSW has played a big role in my ability to help start the Community Based Doula program, where we are working with moms in connection with the Perinatal Network of Monroe County and their Healthy [Moms] program." For women who can't afford a doula's services—which often cost several hundred dollars and may not be covered by insurance—this collaboration can provide one at no charge.

Over the last five years, an increasing number of doctors and midwives have recommended BBC to their patients, and Muscato credits DONA's code of ethics. "We don't step over the line," she says. "We don't advocate directly for our clients. We don't give medical advice or opinions. ... It has helped to heal some of the misconceptions on what doulas' roles are in a birth." And even after spending more than a decade as a doula, each client brings something new for Muscato. "I still learn something from every birth."

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