

## BIRTHPLACE: THE FIRST 11 YEARS

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In October 1982, Birthplace opened as Pittsburgh's first freestanding, nonprofit birth center. This new center came into being after several years of strategizing and countless hours of meetings with interested parents, nurses and midwives who wanted to offer pregnant women and their families a safe alternative to traditional hospital birth. The newly formed Birthplace Board of Directors worked very hard to find an affordable location, a storefront on Ellsworth Avenue, and to get the center up and running. Linda Hoag CNM, became the primary midwife.

But during the first year, Birthplace ran into some problems. Neither Linda nor the birth center could be paid directly by the insurance companies, and patients had to pay her in cash. Soon there wasn't enough income to keep the rent and utilities paid. Around that time, the current Board of Directors left and a new Board was formed. Eventually, Linda decided to retire from her midwifery practice and pursue other professional goals.

Susan Johnson RN, the new chair of the Board, approached me and asked if I'd be interested in "taking over" as the new midwife. I discussed it with Jane Garrett CNM, who was working in a hospital midwifery practice. Jane and I shared the same vision; we wanted to provide patient-focused care, where women were encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of their experience and we wanted to encourage patients and their families to attend prenatal visits and the birth, with the mother's permission. We decided we'd like to try this at Birthplace and we could hardly wait!

I opened the door in January, 1983. About a dozen pregnant women were waiting for us, and we also had other challenges to take care of. Not the least of these was gaining the trust of Elizabeth Stifel MD, who volunteered to continue her unpaid position as the center's Medical Director.

We met monthly with Dr. Stifel for chart review and protocol development. These were amazing learning sessions but I knew I had my work cut out for me at the end of each review. It would be impossible to overstate just how critical a role Beth played in the eventual success of Birth Place; she demanded excellence and we did our best to meet her demands.

At this point there were just the two of us working at the center. Jane and I were clinical, administrative, financial and janitorial partners. We knew how to deliver babies but not much else. A midwife friend in a successful birth center asked me about our "business plan" and I was embarrassed to admit that I didn't even know what a business plan was, much less have one.

Several registered nurses including Lori Albright, now CNM, worked on-call to assist during the birth and postpartum period. She also did laundry, taught classes, and anything else that we needed. However, the remaining work to be done, including routine client visits and more mundane chores such as cleaning, fell to us. As the practice grew and the demand for services became greater, the administrative workload increased.

Anne Pride, who was then Executive Director of Women's Health Services, joined the Birthplace Board in 1984. She brought a wealth of experience and "hands-on" leadership skills

as well as insight into the political process. Within a very short period of time she worked with us to create a more effective practice.

In 1985, legislation allowing third-party insurance reimbursement for nurse-midwifery services was passed, much to our clients and our relief. We were finally able to reimburse clients whose babies were already toddlers and assure a more stable financial future. The center continued to grow and we began to look for a larger, more appropriate space.

No sooner than we had crossed this hurdle we were suddenly faced with the loss of malpractice insurance; the major insurer for medical malpractice nationally had decided to discontinue selling insurance to midwives in Pennsylvania. It was a devastating blow to the women and to the midwifery community, and there was no immediate relief in sight. Jane needed to secure a midwifery position to support her family and left Pittsburgh for South Carolina.

As we were closing, quite literally packing up the center's equipment, I received a phone call from Joseph Russo MD, the new Chairman of Obstetrics and Gynecology at West Penn Hospital. He had worked with midwives before and wanted to introduce midwifery services to his department. He understood the malpractice insurance issue and encouraged Anne and I to consider joining West Penn when it was resolved.

Meanwhile, we, along with other Pennsylvania midwives began to lobby legislators to support midwives in their attempt to gain access to affordable malpractice insurance. A statewide lobbying campaign in Harrisburg in January 1986 persuaded enough legislators to support the midwives, and a new law was enacted mandating that all CNM's carry insurance through the medical malpractice insurance pool.

As the legislative process continued, we began working with West Penn. In 1987 we located to an old house on Baum Boulevard about a half-mile from West Penn and began renovation, all financed by WPH. Both Anne and I held regular meetings with our counterparts at WPH. Anne became the Director of BirthPlace and I was Coordinator of Midwifery Services.

BirthPlace grew. Pictures of our babies lined the walls, and a blackboard in the waiting room announced each new birth. We had such wonderful families! It was such a privilege to be involved in the birth of a baby and I always felt blessed by the experience, and now I finally had more help!

New midwives joined us including Kathy McKain, CNM and we added several new nurses as birth assistants, some of them nurses already working in the labor and delivery suite at West Penn. We offered more childbirth preparation classes, attended health fairs and were invited as guest lecturers at both University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie-Mellon University. We had become active in the National Association of Childbearing Centers and already had participated in a national research project demonstrating that planned out-of-hospital births were a safe alternative to hospital births.

Sadly, a year after BirthPlace opened, Anne was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and died a year after her diagnosis. During this year I was charged with taking on Anne's administrative responsibilities as well as continuing with my own.

We were eager to reach out to the greater Pittsburgh community and potentially move to a larger space. We were already doing more - Kathy was now providing gynecology exams to

female inmates in the county prison. We began accepting midwifery students who needed experience in labor and delivery. This was an exciting time for all of us and it benefitted both our patients and our staff. However, within our own patients and their families as well as within the midwifery community, there was some resistance to admitting the first male (student) midwife Patrick Thornton to our service. But Patrick, who later opened his own midwifery practice at Shadyside Hospital, wanted to become a midwife for the exact same reason we all did, to provide a better experience for healthy women in their childbearing years. He had witnessed the birth of both of his daughters at the hands of a midwife and wanted to offer this option for others.

A year after Anne's death, my husband was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. After his surgery and therapies, he recovered well but a year later the cancer resurfaced and he again underwent surgery. At this time I resigned as Coordinator of Midwifery Services and Kathy McKain took my position.

I remained at BirthPlace after my husband died, but felt I needed some time to myself. I delivered my last baby on New Years' Eve 1993, ten years to the day that Jane and I reopened Birthplace. It was a gratifying experience, albeit terrifying at times. Each day brought a new and unique problem, and we had few guidelines.

Now Pittsburgh finally has a center that is thoroughly professional and well-run while maintaining the woman-centered approach to care which we all strived so hard to give, and which distinguishes it from traditional hospital birth. I am so very proud of The Midwife Center!