

# A labour of love, and support

Much of the birthing process, with medical personnel running in and out, is a blur for the mother and confusing for some fathers. A doula helps ensure the birth plan is followed as much as possible

By Lara Bradley  
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**L**iz and Ivan Conrad had never heard of a doula before signing up for a childbirth class in Onaping Falls.

But when they learned their teacher, Linda Middleton, also worked as a doula supporting women through the childbirth process, Ivan's immediate reaction was: "I want her," recalled Liz. "Because he was terrified."

Baby Elora's birth did prove to be difficult. After 20 hours of labour, instead of her crown presenting, the baby's brow and nose came through first. If Liz had continued to push there would have been the risk of spinal injuries to the baby, so her obstetrician had to perform an emergency caesarean section.

Middleton's support during the long labour and the followup care she provided later "was fantastic," Liz said.

Much of labour, with medical personnel running in and out, is a blur for the mother and confusing for some fathers. A doula helps ensure the birth plan is followed as much as possible, Liz said.

"It's important for the doula to meet with the client before labour starts. You need to find out their wishes and goals as well as to build a relationship," Middleton added.

For instance, if the mother doesn't want to take drugs, a doula can try a variety of methods to help her deal with the pain — from using a palm massager to water therapy — as well as suggest a variety of positions, whether it be bouncing on a birthing ball or hanging from a squatting bar to speed the stages of labour along.

In Liz's case the birth plan had to be altered because of fetal distress, leaving Liz with mixed feelings afterwards and complications due to infection.

Now 15 weeks pregnant, both Liz and Ivan want Middleton to help with the next birth which will be performed by a team of midwives.

"He's scared more than ever, especially after what happened the last time," she said.

Liz is determined to have a vaginal birth this time. Her body wasn't the problem the last time, but the baby's positioning.

"I know I'm in for the long haul and I don't care," she said.

Doula is an old Greek word for an



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Linda Middleton, a childbirth educator and doula, helped Liz Conrad through her difficult labour with Elora, now 2 years old. Conrad is 15 weeks pregnant with her second child and has hired Middleton as a doula again.

experienced woman who supports others during childbirth and/or in early family life.

And that's basically how Middleton got her start. Shortly after giving birth to her third child (her children are now 6, 9 and 10) a

friend asked her to accompany her into childbirth. It went really well. The friend said Middleton seemed to know the right things to do, without even asking her.

"The presence of a mother is big. It makes people feel complete satisfaction and security," she said.

Middleton later read about doulas. "I thought, oh

my God, people actually do this for a living," Middleton said.

Although the concept of doulas stretches far back in history, their existence as a certified childbirth supporter for the mother is relatively new. Doulas of North America (DONA), an organization that has about 3,800 certified members, is marking its 10th anniversary this month, International Doula Month.

Middleton said she spent a couple of years reading everything she could on the birthing process, before starting her training as a doula through DONA in 1999. She then had to get three positive reviews from parents, nurses and doctors, as well as submit a final essay before becoming certified by a committee.

Doulas are not paid by OHIP although they are covered by some medical plans. Middleton charges a flat fee of \$400 per birth, but operates on a sliding scale for low-income clients. She takes no more than two clients with due dates falling in the same month and, so far, has assisted with 20 births.

Currently there are six doulas in the Sudbury area, although some are still in training. Middleton, the regional representative for Doula Care, can refer clients to any of the doulas working locally.

One thing she would like to see change in the future is closer connections between doulas and midwives. In North Bay they often pair up as teams.

"I am making a difference. I do fill a gap even with midwife care," Middleton said. "We make a wonderful birthing team."

So far she has worked with local midwives three times. While they look after the mechanics of the birthing process, she's able to continue to help relax and ease the mother's labour.

As for helping with a birthing when traditional medical care givers are in charge, Middleton said the presence of doulas is definitely needed. Doctors are stretched so thin, they usually just show up for "the catch." Nurses at the hospital also are often so overloaded and short staffed, that they have little time for supporting the mother through labour, she said.

"Teaching childbirth classes is my cake. Doula is the icing. You can't have one without the other. The more I know about child birth the better I am at being a doula."

## FINDING A DOULA

■ **Doula CARE** is an Ontario non-profit organization that has members working in the Sudbury area. Its toll-free number is 1-888-679-3199.

■ **The regional representative** for Doula CARE is Linda Middleton, a childbirth educator and certified doula (966-0239). She will provide names and numbers of doulas working throughout Northern Ontario.

■ **Doulas of North America (DONA)** provides training and certification for doulas. It can be contacted at [www.DONA.org](http://www.DONA.org) or at 801-756-7331.

■ **Other training organizations** for doulas include the Childbirth and Postpartum Professional Association (1-888-548-3672) and the Association of Labor Assistants and Childbirth Educators (617-441-2500).

### ■ Questions to ask a doula:

- How many clients do you work with a month?
- Do you work with a backup doula?
- Can you provide references?
- What is your philosophy of birth?
- What is your fee structure?
- What do your fees include?

### ■ Questions for birth doulas:

- Number of visits before and after the birth?
- When and where do you join the labouring woman?

### ■ Questions for postpartum doulas:

- What tasks do you provide?
- Do you have breast-feeding knowledge?
- Do you meet with the client before the birth?