

## Charity knitting for a Chicago organization

Marillac House – Project Hope for Pregnant and Parenting Teen Mothers

Since 1914, Marillac Social Center (Marillac House) has been serving the needs of the working poor of Chicago's west side community. Programs at Marillac House include child care, services for older adults, social and family services, and Project Hope. Marillac's nationally recognized Project Hope program provides comprehensive support and services for pregnant and parenting teen (age 12-21) that address the many needs of teenage mothers and mothers-to-be in the community. Programs included in Project Hope include the following.

- Prenatal and parenting groups that focus on the relationship between mother and baby
- Regular Home visits before and after the birth of the child
- Doula birthing services that support for teenage mothers during labor and delivery
- Recreational activities and referrals to schools, housing, health agencies, and job training
- Developmental assessments and infant mental health services for newborns

Mother's of all ages love to dress their babies in pretty outfits. Teenage moms are not an exception. The teen mother's would love to receive any knit item for their babies: blankets of any size, sweaters, socks & booties, mittens, caps – full outfits or individual items. Some teen moms have older children so doll clothes or larger sizes for a big sister or brother are appreciated too. Although I've been told that the teen moms may not yet appreciate hand knit scarves, caps, and mittens, the hardworking staff at Project Hope would gratefully accept adult items from knitters who would rather work on larger items.

Marillac House websites

<http://www.marillachouse.org/>

<http://www.marillachouse.org/Services/index.html>

# The New York Times

## ‘Mothering the Mother’ During Childbirth, and After

By **JODI WILGOREN**

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CHICAGO, Sept. 23 — Loretha Weisinger tickled the tummy of 1-month-old Kejuan Kelly, then twirled his tiny blue bootie on her finger. She cooed and cradled him, all the while softly lobbing questions at his young mother.

How many bottles does he drink in a day? (A lot.) How many diapers? (About five.) Does he have a bowel movement every day? (Yes.) Are you reading him bedtime stories? (Yes, that book you gave me.) Do you turn out the light when you put him down? (Yes, so he knows the difference between day and night.)

“Tell me something amazing about him,” Ms. Weisinger prodded, “something amazing that you’re discovering about him.”

“He likes to look at a lot of things,” ventured Kejuan’s mother, Lakenya Cannon, 19. “I didn’t think babies would be that nosey. If he sees my eyes wide open, he’ll open his eyes wide.”

Ms. Weisinger is neither family member nor social worker. She is not Ms. Cannon’s doctor, but her doula.

Part mentor, part coach, all-around hand-holder and advocate, doulas are an increasingly popular childbirth accessory, with the leading organization counting 5,000 registered professionals in 2004, up from 750 a decade before.

But while doulas, who often charge \$1,000 per birth, are typically an indulgence of upper-middle-class mothers-to-be, Ms. Weisinger is leading a newer trend of providing such services to low-income teenagers who usually face labor with far less support and knowledge about the process.

Once a teenage mother herself — she had her first baby at 16 — Ms. Weisinger, now 49, is the star of a new documentary being screened here on Monday evening, as doula devotees try to replicate her work on the West Side of Chicago in cities around the country. Already, there are similar programs in Phoenix, Indianapolis, Denver, Atlanta and Albuquerque, with nascent plans to start up in San Francisco, Seattle, New York, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Washington and even a small town in Alaska.



**Loretha Weisinger, right, was with Lakenya Cannon in Chicago when Kejuan was born after 29 hours of labor. She still provides support and advice. (Photo by Kenneth Dickerman for The New York Times)**

“Every woman needs that kind of support around birth,” said Rachel Abramson, director of Chicago Health Connection, the organization leading the replication effort. “But in terms of resources and need, it’s particularly critical for women who are underserved, who face a lot of challenges in their lives.”

Doulas date to ancient Greece; the word means “woman servant” in Greek, though Ann Grauer, president of DONA International, the membership group formerly known as Doulas of North America, translates it as “wise woman of birth.”

“The concept of the doula has been around as long as there’s been people,” Ms. Grauer said. “If you look at any birth art, going back 2,000 or 3,000 years, there’s always an extra woman who’s in the picture or in the sculpture supporting that mother. We just didn’t have a name for it.”

Unlike midwives, doulas do not deliver a baby, but typically support the mother throughout the process.

In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, researchers found that women who used doulas had shorter labors and fewer Caesarean sections. For low-income teenagers like Ms. Weisinger’s clients, having a doula provide prenatal classes and postpartum counseling led to increased rates of breast-feeding — 50 percent with doulas compared with 30 percent without in a new University of Chicago study — as well as less tangible benefits.

“The mothers who had the doulas talk more to their babies, smile more — they’re just displaying a lot more positive affect and engagement,” said Sydney Hans, the University of Chicago psychologist who ran the study, made up of 248 mothers ages 14 to 21.

“When they talk about childbirth they tend to use more first-person words, like ‘I did this’ or ‘I did that,’ as opposed to ‘the doctor did this.’ There’s a sense of ownership about their childbirth experience.”

Ms. Weisinger’s work is part of a broader teenage parenting program at Marrillac House, a stalwart community center in the largely poor and overwhelmingly African-American neighborhood of East Garfield Park, one of three doula experiments started in this city by the Irving Harris Foundation in 1996. Now there are six such operations in Chicago and 18 in [Illinois](#), serving 750 mothers a year at a cost of about \$2 million, most from the state Departments of Human Services and Education.

Marrillac usually handles 28 births a year; Ms. Weisinger has been through 10 since summer started, with Ms. Cannon’s 29-hour ordeal one of two she witnessed on Aug. 22 alone. “I try not to remember those numbers because it makes me tired,” Ms. Weisinger said when asked how many deliveries she had attended in her career.

A mother of 4 and grandmother of 13 who had previous jobs as a bus attendant and at a box factory, Ms. Weisinger was about to start work as a cook in a downtown restaurant in 1996 when Marrillac, where she had long volunteered, invited her to train as a doula. She almost quit after the first birth, an extreme episiotomy, but soon saw it as a calling.

“The main thing that I think I’m doing is giving them their voice,” said Ms. Weisinger, who earns about \$20,000 a year. “It’s a way of helping them to help their children. My thing is, if you don’t speak up for yourself, it’s hard for you to teach your children to speak up.”

So Ms. Weisinger makes the young women write down three questions to bring to each prenatal doctor’s appointment, which she often attends with them. She takes donated children’s books, toys, pregnancy magazines and parenting videos to twice-monthly home visits.

She tells the women she is available “25/8” because when she used to say “24/7,” some would still not call past midnight or on holidays. Once the babies are born, she has the mothers map out six-month goals.

In the hourlong documentary, which is scheduled to be broadcast on PBS stations starting next month, Ms. Weisinger lays hands on women’s stomachs to feel kicks, holds their shoulders as they breathe through contractions, dances in a prolonged hug with one in the delivery room.

“Mothering the mother” is how doulas explain the essence of their work; Ms. Weisinger says she is often the first nurturing presence in troubled lives.

Je’Taun Ball, one of the mothers featured in the film, said that during her delivery, her own mother was busy crying and the baby’s father stayed in a corner, scared, “but Loretha was telling me techniques to keep the baby safe.”

“She was telling me to breathe to slow the baby’s heart rate, was telling me to stop pushing so she wouldn’t strangle,” Ms. Ball, 22, recalled of her labor three years ago. “She got me to stop panicking and breathe the normal way.”

And when an exhausted Ms. Ball waved off the nurse trying to hand over her newborn daughter, Ms. Weisinger made her take the baby in her arms.

“That was the first moments of my baby’s life, and I would have missed out, I would have regretted that,” said Ms. Ball, who is now working in a nursing home and attending night classes to become a nurse.

“I was a teenager, you know, scared, shy — I didn’t really know a lot about the world,” she added. “I thought it was the end of my life when I had that child. The only encouragement I had was Loretha, who told me I could move on.”



Loretha Weisinger arrives at an apartment in Chicago's East Garfield Park neighborhood bearing a backpack, a toy and a smile. "He's so big and fat!" she says as Lakenya Cannon, 19, holds up her healthy 3-month-old baby, Kejuan. With a minimum of fuss, Weisinger gets down to business. How's the baby sleeping? How much is he eating? Lakenya, a single mom who lives with her own mother, reports that the boy's umbilical cord has fallen off. "Did it seem like it was hurting?" asks Weisinger, before moving on to suggest using a mirror to keep Kejuan alert and entertained. "No, but it was real red," says the young mom.

As Weisinger explains later, she's there as much for Lakenya as she is for Kejuan. "You have to nurture the mother," she says, "so she can nurture the baby." For eight years she has been lavishing this kind of care as a doula (Greek for birthing attendant) on hundreds of mostly

## WHAT IS A DOULA?

A doula is a professional mother's attendant who offers advice and information before, during and after the birth. "They're not midwives or clinicians," says Sandra Whitehead of DONA International. "Doulas don't do anything medical." Some specialize in prenatal care and delivery; others assist after birth.

unwed moms, educating pregnant girls as young as 12 about childbirth, what to expect in the delivery room and the first tenuous months of their babies' lives. Middle-class and wealthy mother can pay a flat rate of more than \$1,000 for similar services. But Weisinger, 49, offers her advice at no charge to girls in the same rough neighborhood where she herself was once a teenage mother. "She gives the girls a good, solid start," says Maureen Hallagan, director of Marillac House, the community center that sponsors her.

Weisinger's first lesson is about attitude adjustment. "They're all teenagers—all they think about is me, me, me," says Weisinger of her young clients. "But I tell them it's about the baby right now." That was a lesson she learned herself when, as an unmarried 16-year-old, she gave birth to her oldest child, Eric, now 33. Three more kids would follow, as Weisinger, who married and later divorced, struggled to support them working full-time at a paper-box factory. After Marillac House paid for eyeglasses for one of her sons, Weisinger began doing small chores there as a volunteer. "She was so connected with the neighborhood and the local families," says Hallagan, who asked Weisinger if she would like to enroll when the facility started the doula program in 1997. Four months of training went smoothly—until Weisinger watched her first delivery. "I just freaked out," says Weisinger. "I just ran out and didn't go back."

The setback was temporary, however, and Weisinger now attends about 18 births annually, offering her own style of tough but tender support and labor coaching. According to a study of

Chicago doula programs, girls she teaches are more likely to breast-feed, less likely to have Caesarean sections and more likely to delay subsequent pregnancies. And Weisinger urges the babies' father to be at the delivery too. "Even if they don't stay with the girl," says Hallagan, "they're much more likely to stay in the child's life because they were there for the birth."

Lakenya Cannon's baby's father was there—and Weisinger stayed by her side for 10 hours straight. "I feel bad sometimes when he cries. I feel like a bad mom," the teen confesses during the doula's recent visit. Weisinger offers reassurance. "Remember when you were saying, 'I don't know how I'll take care of him?'" she says. "'It's amazing how smart you are.'" It's the kind of support that can make all the difference. "I don't call her a doula," says Cannon. "I call her a friend."

**"You have to nurture the mother so she can nurture the baby"**

-Loretha Weisinger,  
Chicago doula

