

## the entrepreneurs

# Doulas help make birthing better

**NON-MEDICAL SUPPORT** Despite endorsement from the medical establishment, the job doesn't always garner what it's worth

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

You know you've picked a vocation, not just a job, when your title comes from the ancient Greek word for "female slave." Lesley Everest is a doula, which means she provides non-medical support for birthing mothers and their families before, during and after labour. This means she often gets yelled at and thrown up on during a non-stop 36-hour shift. It's a job that requires the physical stamina of Tarzan and the diplomacy of Nelson Mandela.

Everest originally wanted to become a midwife, but changed her mind after an experience in 1993.

"I attended (as a doula) the birth of a client whose husband had abandoned her in the last week of her pregnancy. She relied a lot on me for emotional support, as she didn't really have anyone else to turn to at the time. She had a glorious, empowering natural birth.

"After she delivered her son, she had some hemorrhaging. I watched all the nurses and doctors completely engaged in their jobs, working to stop the bleed. While that drama was going on, this new mother looked at me with an expression in her eyes I will never forget. Holding her baby to her heart and gazing into my eyes she whispered, 'I LOVE him ... oh, I love him.' This was my epiphany: Had I been the midwife caring for her, I may very well have missed witnessing this most precious declaration of love. I have never looked back."

Doulas, unlike midwives, are not covered under Quebec's health plan. They typically charge between \$500 and \$1,200 per birth. This includes three prenatal visits, their presence during the entire process of labour and one postnatal visit. Given the unpredictability of a birth date, doulas will often work in teams and share their fee with a replacement if two clients go into labour at the same time.



DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Doula Lesley Everest (right) with Melissa Woodward and Woodward's son, 5-month-old Oliver Vatch. Everest has been a doula for 13 years, providing support for labouring mothers-to-be and doing childbirth education.

In other words, Everest says, no one does it for the money.

Everest is a pioneer of doula training in Quebec. Creating MotherWit, her doula service and training centre, wasn't easy.

"I am a mother of four, and I attend an average of 50 births per year. ... Putting the vision of what I wanted my business to be into creative motion was not as difficult as getting the foundational stuff

together—contracts, pricing, schedules, etc."

She now works with other doulas and apprentices, and relies heavily on her husband—who helps out with administrative work, contracts and dispatching (in addition to working a full-time job and covering for her at home with their kids). This support is vital because being a doula is only a tiny part of her job.

"Promoting the importance of

doula care is something we work tirelessly at," she says.

It's a view that's gaining traction within the medical community. Anjana Srinivasan, a family doctor who practised obstetrics at the Jewish General Hospital for eight years, says: "There's research that shows that coached labour support (not just by husband or friend) reduces risk of interventions and leads to a better birth."

She has worked with Everest in the delivery room. "Even in very difficult circumstances, Lesley's very supportive and acts as a member of the team. She helps relay medical information to the patient, and she's an ally for the doctor or nurse as well because she keeps everyone calm and peaceful."

Srinivasan was so convinced of the benefits of a doula, she hired Everest when she gave birth three years ago.

"She helped me remain calm and focused during my contractions. A lot of times when someone wants a birth without an epidural—or even with one—it helps to stay in a meditative state. She helped with back massage during contractions as well as breathing techniques."

Despite growing support from mainstream medicine, Everest says doulas have trouble charging what they're worth. "Our clients have to pay us out of pocket, so a challenge is finding balance between being affordable to the average couple, as well as ensuring we make a reasonable living. As MotherWit doulas, we are able to give receipts for the work we do as naturotherapists so clients who have private insurance coverage can be mostly reimbursed."

In addition to providing training for doulas (\$975 for an eight-day intensive course), MotherWit provides a 12.5-hour course of childbirth education for families (\$250/couple) across Canada. Everest has also recently been offering "doula tips" workshops to obstetric nurses in an effort to bridge the gap between doulas and the medical community. And she blogs at motherwitdoula.blogspot.com.

"I'm not a 9-to-5 person. Sometimes, when I'm going home at 7 a.m. after a 30-hour labour, I'll look at other folks going to work and think: 'I just helped bring a baby into this world. It's the best feeling.'"

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