

# The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Jun. 05, 2012

## Home delivery: Midwives more popular in South Florida

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Special to The Miami Herald



Max Reed / The Miami Herald

Sheila Watson, a licensed midwife, uses a fetoscope to listen for the heartbeat of Drew Washington's fetus after a Birthing from Within class at her Cutler Ridge office on Sunday, June 3, 2012. "This model of care completely agrees with my spirit, because it enables me to trust my body. It's personal and shows me how to be a mommy," Washington said.

For 10 years, Sheila Watson, a tall woman with light eyes and laughter in her voice, has been helping South Florida women bring their babies into the world only a few feet away from their home nurseries.

"A lot of women I'd come in contact with had horrible experiences [with childbirth]," said Watson, founder of Spirit of Life Traditional Midwifery in Perrine. "Mine was totally different."

After birthing her second child at home with a midwife in the '80s, Watson joined a midwifery study group in New Jersey, apprenticed with a midwife in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia for five years, became a certified professional midwife in 1996, and received a Florida license in 2001.

The number of midwives has grown slightly in Florida over the past five years. In 2006, 1,173 live births in Florida were attended by midwives, according to the Florida Vital Statistics Annual Reports. By 2010, the number was slightly higher, at 1,335 births.

"Birth centers are busy, most midwives have students, and it's difficult to staff birth centers because most midwives open their own practice," said Char Lynn Daughtry, a licensed midwife in Clearwater who is chair of the Florida Department of Health's Council of Licensed Midwifery.

One reason behind the surge is an emphasis on reducing the number of births by C-sections. In 2011, Florida had one of the highest C-section rates in the nation at 36.8 percent of all births, according to a report by HealthGrades. The national average was 34 percent. In 2010, the Agency for Health Care Administration noted approximately 58 percent of births at Kendall Regional and 61 percent of those at South Miami Hospital were C-sections.

Yet obstetricians and gynecologists caution that midwives can't always handle complications that can arise in the birth of a baby.

Dr. James T. Breeden, president of the American Congress of Obstetricians and of Gynecologists, warned in a recent blog post that home births don't always go as planned and

women should have “a certified nurse-midwife, certified midwife, or physician practicing within an integrated and regulated health system with ready access to consultation and a plan for safe and quick transportation to a hospital in case of an emergency.”

“A lot of celebrities and media have been promoting home births, but I think there’s misplaced fear regarding hospital births,” added Dr. Erin Tracy, the Massachusetts chair of the obstetricians’ organization. “Patients are concerned about the C-section rates, but we just want a healthy outcome at the end. Patients are getting a lot of misinformation and are concerned with some things that are not standard hospital practices.”

Certified midwives and certified nurse midwives are well trained, she added, but certified professional midwives, for example, may have only apprenticeship training and may not have experience with complications.

Florida law requires licensed midwives to have completed 90 credit hours in courses such as basic sciences, genetics and neonatal resuscitation. Midwives are required to undergo clinical training and pass the North American Registry of Midwives (NARM) National Certification Examination to become certified professional midwives.

#### Time factor

When Sandra Garcia became pregnant she called her gynecologist’s office and was relieved to learn the doctor was no longer delivering babies.

“Going to see her was never something I looked forward to,” she said. “She would barely say hi to me and looked at her chart during 90 percent of our conversation. I thought maybe I could find a better doctor.”

Garcia learned about having a baby delivered by a midwife after watching the 2008 documentary, *The Business of Being Born*, produced by Ricki Lake, the actress and talk-show host. She was referred to Watson for prenatal care by a certified nurse midwife at Jackson South Community Hospital.

Although they had initially planned for a hospital birth attended by a midwife, Garcia and her husband chose to have Watson deliver their son at home.

“I couldn’t help but notice how warm and peaceful the [office] atmosphere was. I didn’t feel rushed. I asked my questions and she answered them one by one. My husband was also an active participant in the conversation and Sheila was more than happy to address his concerns.”

Jeannine Morris, the lead certified nurse midwife at Jackson Memorial Hospital, understands Garcia’s position.

“Midwives spend more time with their patients and the families,” Morris said. “No matter what kind of midwife they use, women have a more positive birth experience.”

“Birth is a normal thing,” said Dr. Rabah Laoun, an obstetrician at Jackson Memorial and assistant professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. “People have been delivered by midwives since before doctors. Rarely do complications occur during pregnancy.”

While acknowledging his preference toward hospital births, where the patient can be co-managed in case something does go wrong, Laoun believes both midwives and doctors have the same goal: a healthy baby.

### Cost factor

Delivering a baby at a hospital, especially if the birth is through a C-section, can be costly, another factor that can influence whether to work with a midwife.

The Agency for Healthcare Administration reports that between October 2010 and September 2011, the average hospital stay for a woman giving birth vaginally was two days, with hospital costs ranging from \$8,505 to \$14,535. C-section stays were usually three days, costing, on average, from \$16,436 to \$26,984, ACHA reports.

By contrast, licensed midwives usually provide monthly pre-natal visits, birth assistance, and newborn visits for healthy women for about \$4,000 to \$5,000, according to Daughtry, the council chair. Their services are covered by insurance, including Medicaid.

There are three council-approved midwifery schools in Florida: Commonsense Childbirth School of Midwifery in Winter Garden, Florida School of Traditional Midwifery in Gainesville, and the International Institute for Health Care Professionals in Boca Raton.

“Applications have been steadily on the increase and we are now seating two classes per year,” said Glenn Cameron, administrative coordinator for the Florida School of Traditional Midwifery, where the average graduating class includes 10 students.

When Watson first started her practice, she attended one or two births per month. Now, she said, “It’s quite a movement. It’s not just for the granolas. I have moms tell me, ‘I bleach my hair, wear heels, and have home births.’”

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