

Birthing center offers alternatives

By NANCYANN LOFGREN
Of the Emerald

It's like going home to mother's.

Nestled in the little town of Cottage Grove, the old white home looks warm and inviting from the outside. The windows are painted in norwegian rose mauling, a kind of folk art. Around the house, flowers are in bloom.

Inside, there are no long corridors, intercoms, white clad workers or any feeling of urgency or death. It looks like a home, with a living room, a kitchen and two bedrooms. The only things that betray this house are a slight smell of antiseptic in the bedrooms and the medical stand by the window.

The "home" is the Cottage Grove Birth Center.

Irene Nielson, a registered nurse, started the birth center three years ago to give women a choice between a hospital birth and a home-like birth — close to the hospital — where it's both safe and personal.

And more than 600 couples have delivered babies there, with no deaths.

The birth center is divided between the house, which is used only for births, and a separate building used for examinations and clinic business. This division enables the house to be each couple's "home."

"It really is their home," Nielson says. "We as professionals are really guests."

Nielson stresses that the center is not against hospitals. She is in contact with pediatricians, obstetricians and family doctors. But, she says, "We just

don't think everyone should deliver in a hospital.

"There is a rainbow of choices, and you need a variation to choose from," Nielson says. "The real choice of where to have a baby is with the couple."

One couple who chose to have their baby delivered at the birth center was Steve and Karil Qualls.

"I'm not down on hospitals," Karil explains, "but with a doctor, it was five minutes in and out. Irene was a friend."

The Qualls' liked the personal care at the birth center, but another important part of their baby Levi's delivery was Steve's involvement.

"So many times we (fathers) are left out," Steve says. "We're as much a part of the baby as the mother."

Steve became involved in Levi's birth by attending classes with Karil. Then when the baby was born, he helped by sitting behind her and helping with her breathing patterns and relaxation.

"This is your home — bring anyone you'd like," Nielson says.

One couple took her literally and brought a harpsichordist to serenade the delivery, but that was fine with Nielson. "Everyone is different, and that's what life is all about," she says.

Nielson has extensive training in midwifery, including a master's degree in maternal and newborn nursing and a certificate in nurse-midwifery. Her Cottage Grove staff includes three registered nurses, a dietician and an ombudsman.

Because of the center's success, a new birth

center has opened in Harrisburg. The staff includes Ida Lasserson, who is a certified nurse-midwife and pediatric nurse practitioner, three registered nurses, and an ombudsman.

Not every woman should deliver away from the hospital, Nielson says. The birth center has a stringent set of guidelines, patterned after Denmark's, to determine whether a woman should become a client. The guidelines prohibit high blood pressure, diabetes, possible twin birth and smoking more than one pack of cigarettes a day.

Once a woman is accepted as a patient, she receives prenatal care, including a group of six birth classes in either the Bradley or Lamaze method. But Irene stresses "you can't be a purist" with any birth method.

"All the methods have the central message of support and caring, and breathing and relaxation," Nielson says. Birth is normal and "there is not one right way." Women should take the methods and learn the theories behind them, she says.

In addition to the birth classes, the center offers three nutrition classes and a parenting class where parents get together to talk about birth.

About eight percent of the women accepted by the center are referred to doctors before 36 weeks of pregnancy and another eight percent after, Nielson says. She defends her conservatism in this area as safety.

The birth center does not administer drugs, except local anesthetics if needed for an episiotomy, an incision made when the baby doesn't have enough room to be delivered and brain damage could result. In addition, the center is equipped with emergency equipment in the event of hemorrhaging or respiratory difficulties.

After the baby arrives the center provides post-natal care. After two days, a registered nurse visits the baby's home to make sure everything is all right and the center recommends that the mother take the baby to the family doctor at the end of a week. There are also three-week, six-week, and 12-week baby examinations, and an examination of the mother after six weeks. The twelve-week examination includes the Denver Development Coordination Test, immunizations, contraceptive counseling and a reunion class.

The fee in Cottage Grove is \$750 (not including lab cost). The price in Harrisburg is \$850 (including lab work).

On the first and third Saturday of every month, Nielson conducts an orientation session at 10:30 a.m. in Cottage Grove at 524 Adams (485-1167) and at 3 p.m. in Harrisburg, at 269 Monroe (995-8059).

"You don't have to be pregnant" to attend, Nielson says. The sessions are designed to inform people of the center's philosophy, costs, care and facilities. Nielson says the sessions are helpful "for people who are considering all their options."

But the sessions are not used to sign up clients for the birth center.

"You shop around before you buy a refrigerator and a baby is a lot more important than a refrigerator," she says. "So think about it hard."

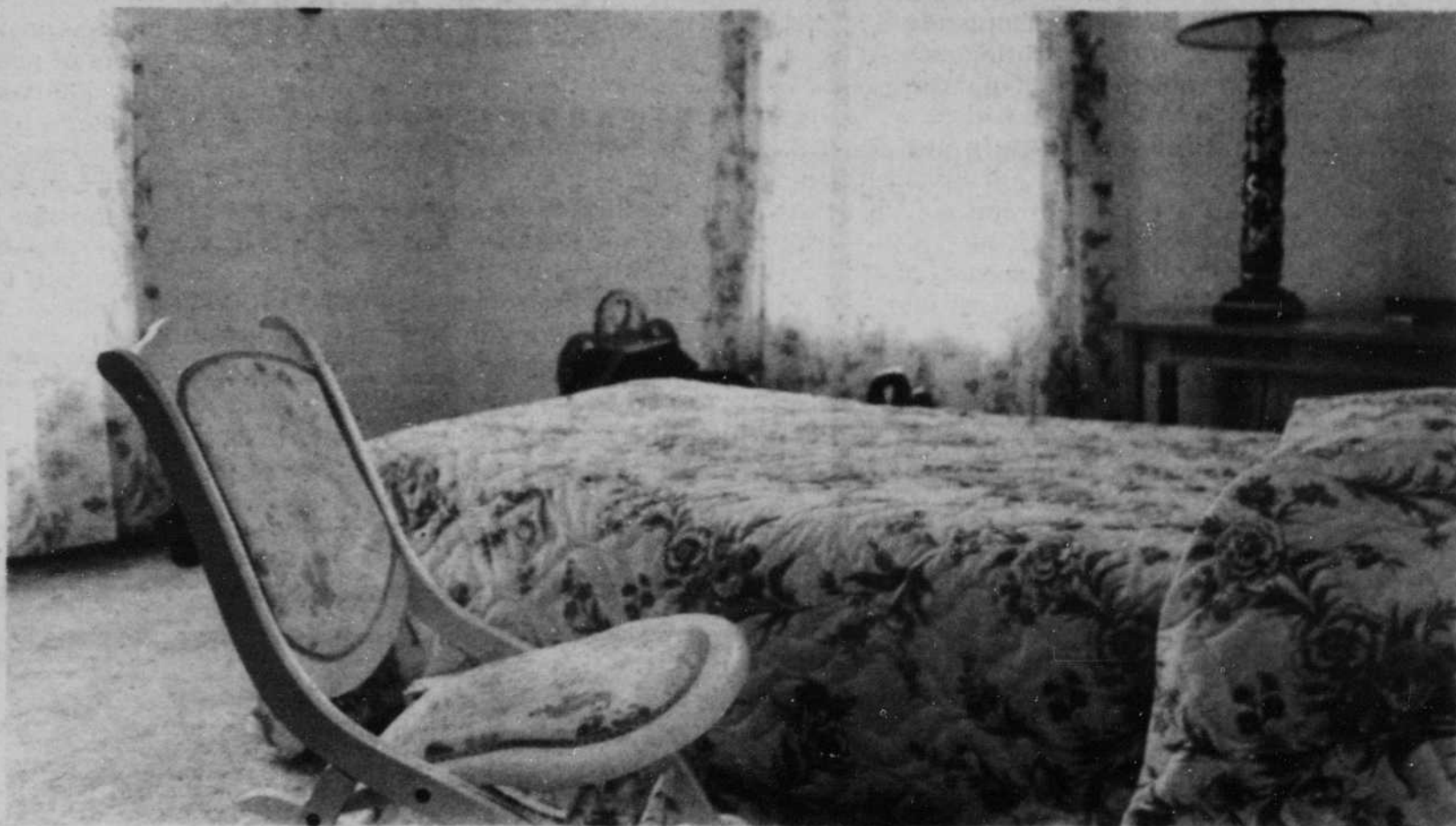


Photo by Jimmi Harris

Cottage Grove's Birth Center offers expectant mothers an alternative to the hospital delivery room. Director Irene Nielson stresses that the center is not in

competition with hospitals, but instead provides couples with a markedly different atmosphere from traditional hospital facilities.

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