

On Mission for Birth Justice

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to prevent medical and societal causes of infant mortality by learning skills from a multicultural, historical and traditional perspective.

Monroe explained there are several reasons why women, black women in particular, benefit from their company.

"For one, the medical model in Oregon doesn't have enough diverse health care professionals," she said. "And there are higher maternal mortality rates amongst minority women."

More black and Hispanic women are dying after having babies, she said.

A lot of women within society are unaware of the alternatives to the westernized model of birth, which often looks for a problem, she said. "They think they have to lie in a hospital bed and be a passive patient, as opposed to the owner of their body and their own destiny and direct their own birth experience," she said. "But women know instinctively what they need, and by having a doula, it really empowers women."

One reason there is such a high rate of maternal mortality can be attributed to the rate of cesarean sections performed on women in labor, she said.

"Women need to know birth is not pathological, not an illness—it's normal," she said. "And by having a doula, you reduce your risk for having a c-section."

According to Monroe, infant mortality within African-American communities throughout the country has remained two and half times higher than the national average per decade, which she said, are caused by more than medical factors, but societal factors as well.

"If we are going to talk about improving birth outcomes and population, then we have to look at the social factors that are contributing to the high infant mortality rate," said Monroe. "And having professionally trained doulas can provide the compassion and understanding to help a women and her family."

Monroe believes birth justice is a byproduct of social justice. "Every black mother is impacted when there is any violence within the community," she said. "A mother's environment can be so stressful it can endanger both her own health and the health of her baby."

When you are pregnant, the environment you live within should be peaceful and supportive, she said. "We know statistically and scientifically, social determinants affect birth outcomes, especially for black women. We don't talk enough about the im-



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
Allison Elliott, Elba Moises, Emnet Getahun and Rosy Valle participate in a Doula Birthing Companion workshop at the International Center for Traditional Childbirth in northeast Portland. The session provides personal support to women and families throughout their pregnancy and childbirth experience.

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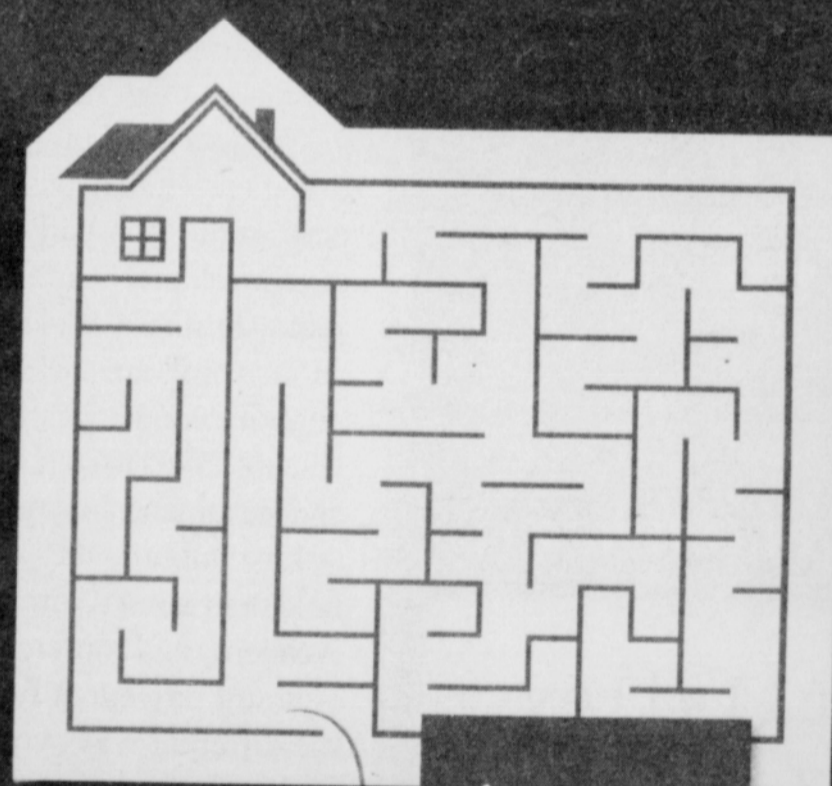
Because the impact of our environment on the health of mother and babies is not talked about enough within our society, this is where doulas can help, said Monroe. "Doulas can understand and sympathize, as a black woman, what the mother is going through while living in a neighborhood often compromised."

Monroe explained the number of doulas is on the rise throughout the country. "What is unique about the ICTC model is that it has a public health component, and it uses a legacy of the African-American midwives in the 20th Century, who were leaders in their communities, providing services to reduce maternal and infant mortality," she said.

This model is a holistic, comprehensive model, which includes the whole family while caring for the mother during pregnancy, birth and after birth, she said. "This is important when we compare the mortality rates cross culturally."

Monroe said she invites anyone to take their training. "Our philosophy benefits everyone," she said. "The program attracts professional women who want to give back to the community they are in by being a partner to the families."

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