



Oh Baby!

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PHOTOS BY MARYJANE BEATTIE/SALTER HILL IMAGES

“We weren’t sure where we were going when we first found out I was pregnant with Violet, but we both wanted the birth to be as natural as possible,” says Nikki Stacey of Brownfield. When she and her husband, Kyle Taylor, learned about Birthwise, a midwifery school in Bridgton, and its adjacent Birth House, they decided that was the right route for them.

Heidi Fillmore started Birthwise twenty-four years ago and soon realized the need for a birthing place to accompany the midwifery school. “Not everyone wants to give birth at home,” she says, “but the center provides a setting between home and hospital.”

“Just as a woman’s heart knows how and when to pump, her lungs to inhale, and her hand to pull back from fire, so she knows when and how to give birth.”

VIRGINIA DI ORIO

She had purchased the Samuel Andrews house on South High Street at an auction in 1999 and opened the midwifery school in the brick mansion. Ten years ago, she engaged local contractor Henry Banks to build a structure in place of an old shed that stood behind the house. The result: a homey, shingled building with a kitchenette and living room where baby prints decorate one wall, plus an examination room on the first floor, and fully equipped birthing room on the second. There are only three freestanding centers like it in Maine.

Heidi has been a practicing midwife for the last thirty years. “The Birth House,” she notes, “is more in line with what we’re used to in the United States—going somewhere to have a baby.” But she adds that most of the world uses midwives, while in the US, ObGyns became the primary care providers and hospitals the customary setting. The tide is slowly changing as people see the benefits of a home birth or out-of-hospital birth and choose a different model than what has long been the norm.

The midwives attend to 25-30 births a year. “When I first started practicing,” says Heidi, “my clients were back-to-landers trying to live off the grid or those with religious

reasons for not going to a hospital. Today, our clients are diverse in every way. They reflect mainstream society and come to us from various cultural backgrounds.”

For Nikki and Kyle, the center’s proximity to Bridgton Hospital added to their confidence in the path they chose for their oldest daughter’s birth. Five-year-old Violet, her four-year-old sister Maggie and their baby sister Caroline were all born at The Birth House. Two-year-old Eleanor was born at home, but with midwifery support.

One of the key things about using The Birth House is that the expectant mother must be healthy and at low-risk for complications. To that end, her natural childbirth team, consisting of a midwife, a student intern, and another student, meet with her throughout the prenatal period and evaluate whether or not the center is still the safest option.

“It’s less about what we can do,” says Heidi, “and more about how we can guide and allow the natural process to unfold. It’s a very patient process. We know some people have long labors. As long as the mother and baby are well, we’re patient with them.”

Hannah Neumann is the current student intern. She sees it as a unique opportunity to complete her academic studies and take on the residency role as the primary midwife under supervision. Her job is to lead the care for clients from the beginning of the pregnancy through six weeks postpartum. She makes sure that clients needs are met, completes administrative tasks involved in running the practice, and teaches child life education as well as offers a free well women clinic to the community.

Building relationships is important. The team spends a lot of time with each client through prenatal visits where they make sure to get to know each woman so when she does go into labor she’ll feel relaxed.

Heidi has been involved in all four of Nikki’s pregnancies, and is treated as a member of the family. That was another important piece for Nikki, as the women she met with during prenatal appointments were the ones who attended each birth, although her third child was something of an exception because she was the only one born at home. Nikki and Kyle had rented a tub from The Birth House because they wanted to home birth Ellie, but were a wee bit late in calling the midwives. “My water broke, and my sister-in-law called Kate, our midwife intern at the time,” explains Nikki, “Ellie began crowning right away

so Kyle delivered her without the midwives being present but Kate talked us through the delivery via phone and the midwives arrived about fifteen minutes after she was born.”

“We believe birth is a normal and natural part of our lives as women,” says Hannah. “We provide individualized care by asking how can we best support you—physically, emotionally, nutritionally? What else might be happening in your life? What fears do you have about birth? What were your past experiences? We find building a foundation of trust and intimacy throughout pregnancy results in our clients feeling safe and cared for during labor and birth, whatever their journey might be. Our care continues beyond birth, up to six weeks postpartum, which continues to be a very sensitive time as women adjust physically and emotionally to life with a newborn.”

During prenatal visits, women may receive the same testing as a hospital would offer, such as diabetes screening and ultrasounds, but it’s up to the client as to whether she’ll choose any or all of the tests. “We provide individualized care,” says Heidi, “with lots of options. We tailor the care to their needs.” Nikki tells me she didn’t have an ultrasound for the first three pregnancies, but was so big with her fourth that she was concerned she might be having twins so she did schedule one and everything was wonderful.

The upstairs birthing room is a peaceful setting with the double bed, a rocking chair, birthing stool, and large tub, plus an adjoining bathroom with a shower. Windows bring the outdoors in to this room painted periwinkle blue. Nikki has always found it to be a calming space in any season and at any time of day.

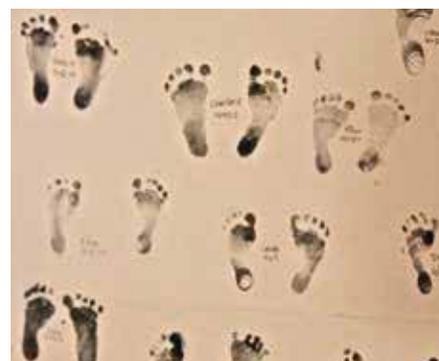


The expectant mother is welcome to invite family and friends if she chooses and children are warmly welcomed. About fifty percent do bring others, but some enjoy coming alone. “I don’t necessarily like an audience,” says Nikki, “but it’s most important that Kyle always be there.”

Her mother has also attended in one manner or another, though after Violet was born, her role transitioned to childcare provider. Five-year-old Violet had shown an interest throughout Nikki’s last pregnancy and so she joined her grandmother part way through the delivery of baby Caroline.

“Violet wasn’t nervous,” says Nikki. “She was very curious. The contractions were getting stronger and I was uncomfortable when she arrived with my mom. The minute Violet entered the room I relaxed for a while.”

One of the many aspects of The Birth House Nikki has appreciated is the ability to move about freely, whether in The Birth House or outside on the grounds, which include a gazebo. She’s also grateful that the



team isn’t in constant attendance. They’ll check on her intermittently, but aren’t overbearing or invasive of her space. “It’s nice to have the freedom to walk around and do what you want,” she says. “They don’t sit there looming over you.” She also appreciates that there isn’t the necessity for an extended stay. Maggie was born at 11:57pm and by 3:30am, Kyle had taken the family home.

Throughout labor, one of the staff’s concerns is that the mother stay hydrated. They also encourage families to bring their own food. It’s been Kyle’s job to prepare snacks in The Birth House kitchen.

For Nikki and Kyle and their beautiful little girls, using The Birth House and all it has to offer has been a wonderful experience. Nikki says, “I wanted a water birth and the first three were born in a tub. I also love the idea that it’s a school and there are students involved. We totally support the midwifery community. They made me feel really empowered and have been very encouraging and supportive throughout the whole process, but especially during labor and delivery.”

Congratulations to The Birth House for breathing confidence into a woman’s ability to birth and offering a family-centered experience. That’s reason to celebrate. Oh baby! 🌻

