Cookie-Exchange Group Shares More Than Just Treats

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to provide a vision of birth to readers, each issue of *The Journal of Perinatal Education* begins with a birthing story. Often, these stories describe the experience of one woman or one family. In this installment of “Celebrate Birth!” however, the author focuses on an example of how groups of women keep collective birthing stories alive across years and generations.

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Our cookie-exchange group’s recollection of our very first gathering is a bit hazy. We know it began in 1977 with a few nurses who worked together in the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Paul Children’s Hospital in St. Paul, Minnesota. We know we are now a group of 15 women who have gathered and exchanged cookies every December for 20-plus years. We look forward to this annual cookie exchange about as much as we look forward to Christmas. And, as women do so well, we bonded together through our cookies—even more so through the love and support we have shared over the past two decades. And, as women commonly do, we shared our birth stories over the years. I became increasingly interested in those stories when I became a labor and birth nurse. As my experience as a birthing nurse grew, so did my admiration for this group of women and for the value of our birthing stories.

With the current high epidural and c-section rates of young mothers at our hospital, I began to look at the past birth experiences of our older

cookie-exchange women. Because I am retired and have time for wonderful projects, I started a scrapbook of our cookie exchange. One of my favorite pages is our page of members’ statistics. The following account of these statistics illustrates what I find to be awesome about our group.

In all, the 15 women of our cookie-exchange group have 48 children, the majority of which were born vaginally. One of the women had two c-sections followed by a VBAC (she says it was “great”). Another group member gave birth to her two babies at home and is proud of her choice. In contrast, under today’s typical birthing experiences, at least 12 to 13 of the group’s 48 babies would have been expected to be born by cesarean birth.

Of the group’s 48 babies, two were premature and one had sepsis; however, they survived as

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healthy infants. One baby girl died of SIDS at 3 months old. Today, 23 girls of the group's 48 babies are now of childbearing age.

Of greatest interest is how all the women in our group gave birth with little or no medication. Various snippets of comments from these women (presented below) describe the factors that enabled them to endure the rigors of childbirth. Some credited their preparation and support, some acknowledged their family heritage, and some praised their beliefs about women and birth:

- Preparation and Support
 - "I focused on each contraction, convincing myself, 'I can do this.' "
 - "I really believed what my childbirth education classes taught me: The female body was meant to labor. . .it can rise above the pain. . .almost self-hypnosis."
 - "I had both babies at home. Preparation was the key."
 - "Husband with me, giving back pressure."
 - "Demerol times 1. . .I hated it."
- Heritage
 - "I had a strong grandmother and mother."
 - "German DNA."
 - "Czech blood."
- Belief
 - "Knowing that other women before me had been strong. . .it was safest for my baby not to have drugs."

- "We are women, we are strong, we are invincible."
- "We cared more about our precious babies than about our own pain."
- "Time erases the pain."
- "God was with us."

We all breastfed our babies, and we helped each other achieve successful breastfeeding outcomes. Now, three members of the group are certified lactating consultants. I am the only doula, so far.

Of the 15 women in our group, only one has been divorced—she is now happily remarried. The members' average length of employment by St. Paul Children's Hospital is 24 years. The nurse who started the cookie exchange recently received an award for 35 years of service at St. Paul Children's Hospital.

Cookies brought us together, but love and support through life's events have kept us together. Our shared belief in a woman's ability to give birth is now being passed down to our daughters. That's how normal birth—the way nature designed it—goes on. The birth that nature and God designed is held close to our hearts forever, giving us strength and belief in ourselves.

Thank you so much for letting me share our cookie-exchange story. You're welcome to come to our annual December cookie exchange here in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Please bring 12 dozen cookies!

SHARON ROMERO is a retired nurse of 33 years, a certified lactation consultant, and a certified doula. She and her husband of 36 years have four children and five grandchildren. Romero was present as a mother and doula when her daughters gave birth to their own children in a beautiful, natural way.

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felt it was unethical to withhold some of the best information around because it might make parents want and ask for the medical care concerning the birth of their child to be of a higher standard based on evidence-based research. I realize that many LCCE educators face this same problem.

I appreciate JPE's publishing of Barbara Hotel-

ling's excellent article advocating the teaching of normal birth and evidence-based care.

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