



Picture taken from *A Doula Story* - a film that documents Loretha Weisinger's commitment to empowering pregnant teenagers. Available in the DONA Boutique.

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Loretha Weisinger dispenses advice and support to Chicago's pregnant teens

Loretha Weisinger arrives at an apartment in Chicago's East Garfield Park neighborhood bearing a backpack, a toy and a smile. "He's so big and fat!" she says as Lakenya Cannon, 19, holds up her healthy 3-month-old baby, Kejuan. With a minimum of fuss, Weisinger gets down to business: How's the baby sleeping? How much is he eating? Lakenya, a single mom who lives with her own mother, reports that the boy's umbilical cord has fallen off. "Did it seem like it was hurting?" asks Weisinger, before moving on to suggest using a mirror to keep Kejuan alert and entertained. "No, but it was real red," says the young mom.

As Weisinger explains later, she's there as much for Lakenya as she is for Kejuan. "You have to nurture the mother," she says, "so she can nurture the baby." For eight years she has been lavishing this kind of care as a doula (Greek for birthing attendant) on hundreds of mostly unwed moms, educating pregnant girls as young as 12 about childbirth, what to expect in the delivery room and the first tenuous months of their babies' lives. Middle-class and wealthy mothers can pay a flat rate of more than \$1,000 for similar services. But Weisinger, 49, offers her advice at no charge to girls in the same rough neighborhood where she herself was once a teenage mother. "She gives the girls a good, solid start,"

says Maureen Hallagan, director of Marillac House, the community center that sponsors her.

Weisinger's first lesson is about attitude adjustment. "They're all teenagers--all they think about is me, me, me," says Weisinger of her young clients. "But I tell them it's about the baby right now." That was a lesson she learned herself when, as an unmarried 16-year-old, she gave birth to her oldest child, Eric, now 33. Three more kids would follow as Weisinger, who married and later divorced, struggled to support them working full-time at a paper-box factory. After Marillac House paid for eyeglasses for one of her sons, Weisinger began doing small chores there as a volunteer. "She was so connected with the neighborhood and the local families," says Hallagan, who asked Weisinger if she would like to enroll when the facility started the doula program in 1997. Four months of training went smoothly--until Weisinger watched her first delivery. "I just freaked out," says Weisinger. "I just ran out and didn't go back."

The setback was temporary, however, and Weisinger now attends about 18 births annually, offering her own style of tough but tender support and labor coaching. According to a study of Chicago doula programs, girls she teaches are more likely to breast-feed, less likely to have Caesarean sections and more likely to delay subsequent pregnancies. And Weisinger urges the babies' fathers to be at the delivery too. "Even if they don't stay with the girl," says Hallagan, "they're much more likely to stay in the child's life because they were there for the birth."

Lakenya Cannon's baby's father was there--and Weisinger stayed by her side for 10 hours straight. "I feel bad sometimes when he cries. I feel like a bad mom," the teen confesses during the doula's recent visit. Weisinger offers reassurance. "Remember when you were saying, 'I don't know how I'll take care of him?'" she says. "It's amazing how smart you are." It's the kind of support that can make all the difference. "I don't call her a doula," says Cannon. "I call her a friend."

[Inset Box]

WHAT IS A DOULA?

A doula is a professional mother's attendant who offers advice and information before, during and after birth. "They're not midwives or clinicians," says Sandra Whitehead of DONA International, which trains and certifies doulas. "Doulas don't do anything medical." Some specialize in prenatal care and delivery; others assist after birth.

[Quote]

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