

# The Daily Californian

## Lifestyles - Section C

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By Jennifer Smither, Staff Writer

Lisa Simpkins, of El Cajon, expects to give birth to her second child in the next week or so, with her family -and her doula - at her side. It's really nice, Simpkins said. "I feel like I have a little more control, because in labor there are so many things going on, you can barely speak for yourself."

Simpkins, as a perinatal health instructor at an obstetrician's office in Poway, has researched the doula's role extensively - she's one, too. Simpkins is among a group of 17 independently practicing doulas who work through the San Diego-based Birth Resource Network (BRN). Founded by Gerri Ryan in September, the group meets monthly for in-service programs and mentoring. May is International Month of the Doula.

The Greek word "doula" refers to a woman who provides continuous physical, emotional and informational support to a mother at all points in the childbirthing experience. The point isn't to take the place of any health care providers, Simpkins said, but to help the mother in ways that most hospital nursing staff just don't have time for - to give words of encouragement, answer questions, demonstrate relaxation techniques and offer educated advice.

Simpkins describes her first labor two and-a-half years ago as a 'horrific experience,' stressful both physically and mentally. "I came to realize hospitals can't let nurses be what they're supposed to be in the first place caretakers," she said.

Having received two bachelor degrees in the medical field at University of California, San Diego, prior to the birth of her first child, Simpkins said her hospital experience was frustrating enough to make her pursue a position in perinatal education. It was while, taking further classes at UCSD that she met Ryan, learned about BRN and found that she just couldn't sit back anymore."

In the past couple years, Simpkins has helped some 18 families through the pregnancy experience as a doula. Now she's on the receiving end. "I've always been a caretaker," she said. "I'm not used to having someone take care of me."

Over the months Ryan has cooked dinner, given massages, babysat for Simpkins, offering her the kind of support she's used to giving. Ryan, herself the mother of four, dropped out of the rat race of corporate America three years ago looking for something that might rejuvenate her life. She had attended many births of family and friends and had always wanted to be a midwife, but didn't know where to start. It wasn't until she met a real-life doula who explained to her what the discipline was all about that she found her niche. With my own children, I wasn't aware of doulas, but I had my own female support system, Ryan said. I found that I surrounded myself with women, like family and friends.

She coordinated the doulas for BRN, many of whom were already working as doulas throughout the county, through health-oriented classes and word-of-mouth, she said. The existing group consists of RN's, nurses and educators.

Women have fewer choices in health care than they did 15 and 20 years ago, Ryan said. Birth is a very personal experience. I want my children to have the same choices I did, and that might not be handled by managed care. Doulas are nothing new, Ryan said, although they might not have always been called doulas. She said the United States is one of the few countries in the world that doesn't provide continuous care for laboring mothers. BRN, in fact, is part of a larger organization called Doulas of North America (DONA) that got its start in 1992. Over the past six years the group has grown from 85 to 2,150 members.

There are so many personal benefits, Simpkins said. I feel like I'm going to be taken care of, and my mom or my husband don't have to be scared. So many times we put the family members in the role as the birth expert, and sometimes it's hard to see a family member in pain.

Ryan said what doulas do is nothing mystical or off-the-wall, but something that most people know instinctively. I honestly believe women, and their families, know how to deal with all this, she said. They just need someone like us to point out what kind of words are encouraging, what works for them to relax and enjoy the process.

Since doulas typically work independently, individual fees vary, Ryan said. Most charge between \$300 and \$400, which includes a free consultation. Ryan recommends mothers-to-be screen several doula candidates before deciding who will help them through their term.