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Offering help for mothers

By CAROL HUNTER--Half Moon Bay Review

When Leslie Robertson of Half Moon Bay was expecting her second daughter Grace eight years ago, she wanted to have a natural birth in the hospital, without pain medication or technical interventions. But she didn't want to do it alone. Instead, she hired Chris Pritchard to help her and her husband through the labor.

Before the birth, Pritchard met with Robertson and her husband to get to know them and talk about their plan. When Robertson went into labor, Pritchard met the couple at the hospital and stayed with them for 12 hours, helping them have the natural birth they wanted.

Robertson said one of the benefits was that Pritchard's presence took the pressure off her husband, allowing him to just be there and absorb the experience.

"It gave him a real feeling of safety and confidence," said Robertson. "It was like we were going on a journey, and Chris had already been there and knew the signposts. It freed us up to just relax."

Pritchard is a doula, a term that may be unfamiliar to some, but has become widely recognized in delivery rooms, maternity wards and among expecting couples. A doula, which means "servant to women" in Greek, is a woman experienced and often specially trained in childbirth and infant care who is hired to provide one-on-one emotional and physical support to women and families during labor and in the early days and weeks of new parenthood.

Pritchard now has a new partner, Sara Russell, who is helping her make this kind of support available for Coastside families through a joint venture they call "Mama to Mama."

Both women bring a wealth of professional and personal experience



Chris Pritchard and Sara Russell of "Mama to Mama" peer into a mirror that is surrounded by photos of babies and the mothers they have worked with.



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to the aid of new moms.

Pritchard is a registered nurse who has worked with childbearing families for more than 27 years in hospital delivery rooms, alternative birth centers, and at midwife-delivered home births. Besides her professional experience, Pritchard had three babies of her own, with experiences ranging from a home birth to a planned hospital cesarean to the loss of a child after 25 weeks.

Russell used to work a regular 9-to-5 job, but became interested in working with new moms after having to her two sons, Sterling, now 5, and Sage, now 2.

"I didn't anticipate how much I would enjoy the whole birth process," said Russell. "It knocks you out of the ballpark. This is a way for me to still be connected to that early part."

Russell has trained as a postpartum doula with a group called Natural Resources in San Francisco and the doula association DONA International, and is also a breastfeeding counselor with the Nursing Mothers Counsel.

Pritchard said that the support the doulas provide during labor used to come from mothers, sisters, aunts and other close relatives when people lived in extended families, but the nuclear family and movement of birth out of the home and into the hospital in the last several generations has left modern families feeling isolated.

"These days, we don't see our sisters give birth," she said. "A woman who has never seen it and never been around it, she doesn't know if she can do it. There is so much to birth that frightens people. We try to dissipate the fear that comes around with all the technology and testing."

Unlike doctors and nurses at the hospital, who are usually caring for many laboring women at once, the doula can focus her complete attention on her client and stay by her side through the entire process. And unlike a well-meaning partner, the doula has assisted many other women through labor and usually been through the process herself, so she knows what to expect, what situations are normal and what situations need a doctor's or midwife's attention.

The need for support doesn't end at the birth. Once parents have their new bundle of joy at home, they are often overwhelmed with issues that include diaper rash, gas, colic, sore breasts, weird poops, lack of sleep and lack of sex. While family and friends can try to relieve the burden, it is often helpful to have an experienced support person to help the couple through those early weeks.

Coastside resident Ellen Moore and her partner knew they would need support after their son was born last year, so they hired Russell

to help them as a postpartum doula.

"She was incredible," said Moore. "She came over every other day for a couple hours, just to make sure things were running smoothly."

Sometimes the little things can feel frightening at the beginning. In the early days, Moore was terrified to cut her infant's tiny fingernails.

"It was very intimidating for me," she said, "but Sara just jumped right in there. Watching her, I thought, 'I can do that.'"

Beyond baby care, a postpartum doula will usually do whatever is needed to help out. For Moore and her partner, Russell brought over food and cooked warm meals, helped with dishes, laundry, watering plants, anything the couple needed.

Beyond doula services, Pritchard and Russell will also be offering childbirth preparation classes, one-on-one classes for older siblings who will be present at the birth, and breastfeeding classes through Mama to Mama. They are also continuing Mama Circle, a long-running support group for new and expecting moms, where women can bring their babies, share their birth stories, concerns and newly acquired knowledge with other local mothers, and often build friendships that can last a lifetime.

It's all part of a new kind of extended family Pritchard and Russell are hoping to create for families on the coast through Mama to Mama.

"It really does take a village to raise a child," said Pritchard. "Parents are very burnt out trying to raise their kids alone."

For more information on Mama to Mama, contact Chris Pritchard at 728-3950 or Sara Russell at 490-0914.

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