

Jailed for being a Midwife

by Lisa Robinson

Until 1917, non-medical home birthing with midwives was legal in California. Then the State decided to require that midwives be graduates of an approved school of midwifery, but California had no such schools. Between 1917 and 1949, the only midwives to receive California midwifery certificates were graduates of foreign training; mostly in Japan, the UK, and Italy. During WWII, Japanese midwives were interned and the number of home births plummeted.

During the 1960s, and the rise of the hippie movement, women began to question medicalized hospital delivery. Here in the haven of the Santa Cruz Mountains, where many were seeking alternative, more natural, and more meaningful lifestyles, women began to take ownership of their bodies. They turned to each other to deliver their babies and the modern lay midwifery movement was born.

In 1968, Diane Skamser and her husband John delivered their baby, Dabe, at home in Brookdale. In the Santa Cruz Mountains, Diane soon became the go-to person for the young, pregnant, well-educated community of women looking for alternative birthing experiences. By the time new Ben Lomond resident Raven Lang met her, Diane had already attended 16 home births.

Raven, a new mother herself, was fascinated by the experience of home birth - an experience so different from her own Stanford Hospital delivery in 1968. Raven began attending home births, realized that midwifery was her calling.

In 1971, Raven, along with Kate Bowland and Linda Walker, established the Birth Center on Escalona Drive in Santa Cruz. Here the midwives provided prenatal and postpartum care, and birth classes. They attended around 20-30 home births per month.

Around 1972, Celeste Phillips, a nurse educator at Dominican Hospital learned about the "underground" lay midwives and visited the Birth Center. Celeste recalls: "At the Birth Center I saw more pregnant women in the living room than we had patients coming to Dominican Hospital."

On March 25, 1972, a Birth Seminar organized by Raven was held in the dome at 1000 Alba Road, Ben Lomond. Celeste brought obstetrician Dr. Joseph Anzalone and several nurses. Celeste asked: "What do you think of this?" There were pictures of women giving birth in different positions. There was a woman

on the floor of an art studio on her hands and knees giving birth. He responded: "Anatomically it makes it makes total sense"

In 1974, Birth Center client Terry Johnson of Ben Lomond called for midwives to come to her home because she was in labor. Kate was concerned; Terry had missed prenatal visits, had not turned in blood work, and now was in labor too early. Linda Bennett and trainee Jeannine Walker went to her home. It turned out Johnson was an undercover operative. The two midwives were arrested.

Then the Santa Cruz Birth Center was "Busted." As the surreal raid was happening, Kate had the presence of mind to call a radio station. During her arrest, she was being interviewed live. Kate, joined Linda, and Jeannine in the Santa Cruz jail.

The three midwives were charged with practicing medicine without a license. They argued in court that assisting at a birth does not constitute the practice of medicine since childbirth is not a disease. In 1976, the California Supreme Court handed down the *Bowland Decision*, that resulted in lay midwifery being defined by case law as an illegal practice of medicine.

To learn what happened next, visit *Birth Happens*, a new exhibition at the Faye G. Belardi Gallery of the San Lorenzo Valley Museum in Felton.

As of 2021, there are two paths to becoming a legal midwife in California: Certified Nurse Midwife (CNM) and Licensed Midwife (LM). The midwifery standards of care are equal.