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Filmmaker champions natural childbirth

(by Megan Burrow - July 16, 2008)

For many filmmakers, their first movie is a labor of love. For River Vale resident Debra Pascali-Bonaro, creating her first film was a long and, at times, difficult labor, with complications and surprises along the way, but one that was more than worth the struggle.

A champion of natural childbirth, Debra was inspired to make her documentary "Orgasmic Birth" after working for the past 26 years as a doula, providing emotional and physical support to women during pregnancy and labor.

"I knew that in my living room teaching childbirth classes, I could work with maybe six or eight couples at a time," she explains. "I thought, the media's so powerful, what if we created a film that could reach many more people and give them an opportunity to see their options.

"The media and culture today gives off so much negativity about birth, saying the only thing you're going to experience is pain, fear, and almost terror, and it's really not true. I think we've duped a whole generation of people."

The film follows 11 couples as they go through the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Most of the births in the film take place in homes with the assistance of a midwife and doula.

Birth has been described as alternately the most important event in a woman's life and one of the most painful things a woman will experience, but "orgasmic" is a new one for many. Debra says although it's something people don't often talk about, birth can be an extremely pleasurable, even ecstatic experience. "Birth is a part of a woman's sexual life," she said. "The same hormones that are needed for conception are the same hormones of orgasm. We really need to start thinking of birth as a sensuous event. It is like the experience of an athlete. To go through labor is like an athlete crossing the finish line of the New York Marathon. It can bring you such ecstasy."

"Orgasmic Birth" is currently being screened around the United States and in countries around the world. Its first local screening will take place July 30 at Palisades Hospital in North Bergen. Although there is no confirmed date as of yet, 20/20 will be running a segment on "Orgasmic Birth" sometime before the end of September.

Debra first became interested in the field of maternal care after the birth of her own son 26 years ago. She was amazed at how hard she had to advocate for the kind of birth she wanted. Growing up, she enjoyed close relationships with a trio of strong women – her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother – all of whom had given birth naturally, and she didn't feel afraid of the experience. Yet, she said, "I had to fight so hard just to be allowed to work with my body."

Shortly after, she began working as a childbirth educator and going to births with couples helping them through the labor. One day as she was sipping a cup of tea and reading a magazine, she had an epiphany: the article she was reading described a woman who was employed as a "doula."

"I thought, wow, I'm a doula then!" Debra says with a laugh. "There's a word for what I do!"



Photo Courtesy Of Judith Halek

A champion of natural childbirth, Debra Pascali-Bonaro was inspired to make her documentary "Orgasmic Birth" after working for 26 years as a doula. Pictured above, a mother featured in the film holds her baby after giving birth.

In 1992, the very first meeting of Doulas of North America (DONA) was held in Boston, Mass. Debra attended, excited at the prospect of meeting others in her growing profession. By the end of the conference, she had not only met many of the leaders of DONA, she had been invited to serve on its very first board.

Since her initial work educating women in her own community, Debra's passion for natural childbirth has taken her all over the world.

She has worked with the ministries of health in several countries, developing doula programs as part of their health care systems. She also has taught midwifery, nursing, and medical students at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, and New York University, helping students who are entering maternal care, "see birth in a new way."

In 2005 Debra helped form and co-chair an international committee called the MotherBaby Childbirth Initiative (MBCI). It was modeled after the Mother Friendly Childbirth Initiative (MFCI), a program she had been involved with since its beginnings over a decade ago. The MFCI was created to develop the best model for optimal outcomes for mothers and babies, through examining research and working with doctors, nurses, midwives, and doulas.

There was a lot of interest in the initiative internationally, but it was never intended for global use. Instead of exporting the American model, MBCI was formed and conducted a global survey, asking organizations in 163 countries to evaluate the MFCI and suggest ways it could be translated on an international level. Global leaders from the World Health Organization, Unicef, the International Confederation of Midwives, the International Pediatric Association, the International Confederation of Nurses, and many other organizations were invited to come together as a technical advisory group, and the initiative was officially launched this past March.

Reflecting on where her career has taken her, Debra marvels, "It has been such an incredible journey to support women here in Bergen County and also have the opportunity to work with people in so many different countries."



Debra Pascali-Bonaro

Through her travels, a major difference she has observed between maternal care in the and abroad has been the use of technology and the level of intervention in the natural birthing process. In other developed nations, midwives are the caregivers for nearly all healthy, low-risk women. In the United States, this figure is down to eight percent. The problem, Debra says, lies in not following evidence based practice.

"We have really good doctors, midwives, nurses, but we have a system that's in chaos right now and is not really serving anyone very well," she says. "The saddest part is that at the end of the day, there are a lot of mothers and babies that are suffering because the system is not serving them in an optimal way."

Among the ways to make labor shorter and easier for women are sitting upright and being mobile, being able to eat and drink during labor, and being able to enjoy some privacy in a comfortable environment. Many times, says Debra, hospitals encourage just the opposite, making labor painful and dangerous for the mother and baby.

At approximately 39 percent, New Jersey has some of the highest rates of caesarian sections in the country, and according to Debra, some local hospitals have C-section rates of nearly 50 percent. "C-sections save lives when they're needed," she says. "But when half of the women walking in the door are having major abdominal surgery for a normal physiologic event, you start putting more risk from surgery and anesthesia than is necessary on a healthy person, and that isn't OK."

In making "Orgasmic Birth," Debra Pascali-Bonaro hopes to educate women and their partners on the choices they have, because, "if you don't know your options, you don't have any."

“Our film is really about the need for privacy, to be in an environment, whether it be a hospital, birthing center, or home, where they set the stage, where they are honored and respected to be a part of the decision making.”

To find out more information about the film and Debra Pascali-Bonaro's work, visit www.orgasmicbirth.com.

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^ [back to top](#)