AIMS For a better birth...

Birth Story: Sheffield Screening

AIMS Journal 2013, Vol 26, No 3

An assortment of midwives, students, lecturers, doulas, health commissioners, pregnant women and people just curious about birth flocked to their cinema seats and the evening got underway. I am an avid reader of Ina May Gaskin's books and love her common sense approach to childbirth. I felt strongly about getting *Birth Story* screened in my hometown of Sheffield in the independent cinema, The Showroom.

Ina May has inspired generations of people, including myself, to their calling as midwives, doulas and childbirth educators. With over 200 people in attendance, it fills me with confidence that she still continues, at the age of 72, to draw in the crowds.

The film takes us back to The Farm's very beginnings in the early 1970s when young people were speaking out and exploring alternative ways of thinking. Ina May's husband Stephen Gaskin started 'The Monday Night Class' in San Francisco, where he lectured others on his revolutionary views of life. His previous college lecturing contract had ended and he became 'too weird' to be rehired. His class was a success so they took to the road with 50 buses and bread vans filled with young hopefuls, which affectionately became known as 'The Caravan'.

They settled on a patch of land in Tennessee where they founded America's biggest and longest running intentional community (commune), 'The Farm'. They were 'spiritually seeking', said one of the midwives, and they did. When there was so much violence in the world, including behind hospital gates, it became necessary for them to create a new culture where 'fear wasn't going to play a big part'.

Ina May recounts her first pregnancy when her obstetrician told her : as it was her first birth she would definitely require a forceps deliver y, otherwise her baby was 'at risk of brain damage'. Ina May remember s this seemed illogical that nature would design all first borns like this but didn't want to argue with the doctor! This was a time in America when obstetricians were using forceps and episiotomies like kids with new toys and human atrocities were going on behind closed doors.

In stark contrast when she witnessed her first birth in the back of one of the converted buses, she was awestruck by the power and beauty emanating from the woman. Ina May had a knowing, a kind of deep, feminine, intuitive knowledge that the sacrament of birth needed to be respected and kept within the family. So the women learnt midwifery themselves in order to sustain their community and ideals. The Farm's midwifery centre grew from the determination of the group to create a better birth experience for the women. It is significant to note that although they were steering away from the masses, they had safety as a priority. Trucks were meticulously maintained to ensure safe transport of women in an

emergency and, as well as two Farm residents training as doctor s, they had close ties with a compassionate local GP. Yet what remains so incredible about their practice is their low rates of intervention.

Between 1970 and 2000, 4.9% of women required transfer, 0.55% had instrumental deliveries and only 1.4% of women needed caesarean sections.[1] Her book 'Spiritual Midwifery', which arose from the birth stories women were sharing with each other, has since been translated into many languages and is still used in the Dutch midwifery curriculum today.

We could view this film as a historical look at how wrong we were to over medicalise birth and how we've moved on, but have we? Ina May's job is not over. When even the surrounding states outlaw midwifery, women come to use the birth centre to this day. She's shown in the film continuing to speak at conferences worldwide about the importance of the midwifery profession and her concerns about the rising rates of caesareans worldwide and maternal deaths in the United States. A culture of fear is rising again in the west. Negative views of birth continue to be perpetuated by the media. It begs the question, are we becoming too clinical and straying away from the spiritual, wise, 'with woman' role?

The film ended and I introduced our speaker, Jane Evans, a UK expert on twins and breech birth and author of the AIMS book *Breech Birth: What are my options?* A midwife since 1976, practising independently since 1991, she was perfect to speak after the screening as she has spent time on The Farm. In the movie we saw a clip of a breech birth; Jane noted that in this birth, the lady was on her back. It was archival footage and she made us aware that

The Farm midwives were sourcing knowledge from obstetric textbooks in the very early days. Jane gave us an excellent demonstration of a breech birth using her handy pelvis and doll. She expressed the importance of using gravity; ensuring women are in an all fours or similar upright position which additionally allows the coccyx bone to make more room for the baby. Breech presentation occur s in 3-4% of pregnancies. In 1% of births, undiagnosed breech still occurs and Jane spoke about the importance of reskilling birth attendants in the vanishing art of vaginal breech birth. Without skilled providers in breech birth, we are doing women a serious disservice and limiting their choice.

I left with a memory of the film's final scene: a beautiful water birth in one of The Farm cabins. The woman was surrounded by her family and caught her own baby as it came into the world; a reminder that we women are pretty awe-inspiring. The audience disbanded, and a quote from the film came to mind:*'it's not just a few hippies interested in better birth, it's all kinds of people!'*

Amy Barker

References

1. Gaskin I.M. (2002) Spiritual Midwifery. 4th ed. Book Publishing Company: Summer town, Tennessee.