

Tú Mandes: How to Pick a Doula or Who do you want at your Birth?

By Ariban Chagoya

I had a new mama and daddy come to the office last week and I advised them to meet other doulas before making a decision. And the question came up about how does a mama pick somebody to help her at the birth?

Of course, it's nice and cheaper if you can get a trusted Tia or Grandma to help you on this awesome journey of childbirth. And it would be nice if she was knowledgeable about hospitals and has the ability to help you process all the feelings that may come up. However, she can't be more scared than you. I've been at births where the mama asked that her own mother be away from her for that reason alone.

As a doula or the Señora in the village or barrio, if I am at the birth and your favorite family member comes in to

help, I know when to step away and let them help because it's about you deciding how you want to birth your child.

First, it should always be the mama's decision on who, what, the when that she wants at the birth of her child. A woman in this society never gets asked how she wants to birth her baby. She gets told how to deliver and to submit; she is usually taught to never question anything. And mostly she hears the horror stories of birth. Rarely do we hear the best birth stories.

My favorite story is about how I almost caught the baby at a park in Austin. When I arrived to the mama's house, she was having contractions almost every minute.

I said, "We need to go!"

On the way to the hospital she kept yelling, "I'm not kidding you guys. I am gonna push!"

I said, "If you do, it is ok. But I think you will make it."

In my mind, I am scanning where to pull over and it's a woodsy park. I see the parking lot of the park but in that split second, I decide to try for the hospital.

When we arrived, she was immediately wheeled into the room and a nurse yells, "She's about to have her baby!"

A group of nurses wheel her and place her into a delivery bed quickly. Once she's in bed, she raises her leg open but before that she yells, "I want an epidural!"

And the baby comes out like as if on a slip and slide!

I whisper the mama's name and softly say, "The baby is on top of you."

The baby was a 9 lb. boy. The mother was tiny woman under 5 feet. This was my quickest birth—a lil bit nerve racking, but a beautiful birth.

One never knows how a birth will turn out. Luna, my doula friend, says births are like snowflakes.

They are all the same but different.

I'm glad that the mom picked me for her birth. When you pick a doula or plan for your birth, you need to trust them. Somebody told me that they



Ariban Chagoya pictured with two of her babies. At left and right direct massage with hands or rebozos help mothers relax.

picked me as their doula because I look like I mean business. She said she felt safer. Pick a doula that is fierce but not angry—angry at her own birth trauma—angry at the doctors. She has to have the ability to help you fight for your right to birth your child in the way you want to. She has to be suavecita meaning she has to be graceful and respectful of medical staff but also has the ability to make your wishes clear. You want a doula who can take care of you emotionally, physically and mentally. She will protect you and watch over you to make sure your wishes are supported. And although she may not agree with you, she will allow you to make the final decision on all matters. It's your body. It's your birth. With my 17 year old client, I especially used a phrase all mamas need to hear, "Tú mandas."

At any age, a pregnant mom needs to hear she has options and choices. You need a doula that has worked on her own trauma around birth. Because at the time of a birth, everybody's trauma around birth, including the doctors and nurses, are all getting triggered, and it becomes about time and how much pain we can stand to see a mama go thru.

Worse birth I went to wasn't bad, but it was a totally un-

necessary c-section. The mother was so terrified that she asked to be completely out during the cesarean. I tried to explain to her what she would miss out on but again it was her choice. Her biggest regret afterwards was that she didn't get to experience or be able to hold her baby till the next day. But if a woman doesn't have a good birth, there is still healing that can happen after a birth, too.

Every mama needs healing after a birth no matter the outcome. This is why it's important to support mothers after a birth. We can help with postpartum, too. This is where birth stories are helpful. Mama has to tell her story over and over. And so does Daddy and anyone else at the birth. I still love telling the story of how loud my voice was when I yelled out, "He is big, Luna!", at my godchild's birth 22 years ago.

I often ask myself when did birth get so terrifying? Birth is a serious life changing spiritual, physical and emotional experience. We are talking Life, right? What happened to make the experience frightening?

Luna, the other Doula with 7th Generation Birth Services, said King Louis started putting women in stirrups—maybe that's why.

In my own training as a doula, I almost had an emotional breakdown at a birth where forceps and an episiotomy was done. Later, I ask my mother about my birth in 1960. She said that I was a small baby and that she was given some drug.

Then she added, "Me cortaron. They cut me. I don't know why? You were little, only 6 lbs. Y me cortaron at every birth. All 5."

It was common practice to experiment and disregard women of color/poor women birthing at a hospital. We swallowed the idea that the hospital was the best for us and that we would be treated well despite racism. And we know from statistics that Black woman having a college degree doesn't guarantee that her child birth will be a safe one.

Aside from racism, the oppression of women didn't leave out my white sisters. They, too, are taught to submit and carry on the grief of what was done to our bodies. White women are just as terrified of birth as women of color.

I imagine when we were tribal and connected to the earth more that we didn't need a test to know if we were pregnant. We didn't have a doctor to tell us how far along we were before the child was to be born. I suspect that we knew intuitively if we were pregnant or not.

We probably had a wise experienced elder that was known for being helpful in childbirth and pregnancy—that a mother was not left alone, with her feelings. That she intuitively knew her body and what she could and could not do. And that daddy was present to support her, overwhelmed with excitement. That she felt safe with the people that would be there during the birth. That she wasn't terrified that she was gonna be mutilated or violated or die. That she was confident she could bring this baby into the world and nobody around her doubted

her. That she knew how to trust her body and herself. Birth is painful and no doubt it's a lot of work. It doesn't come like clockwork. A woman will face everything she's been avoiding during this time. It probably was assumed that she would live to mother that baby.

Above all, that no one at the birth was terrified for her. The tribe was confident that a new member of the tribe was arriving. And waiting with so much hope for this child. Only the best for the next generation coming.

When a woman is supported—that baby will want to birth their own babies in a loving and supportive way. And that grand baby will have a peaceful loving birth of their child and so on for the next 5 generations. In the future, I trust that our children will birth in a hospital or home without fear.

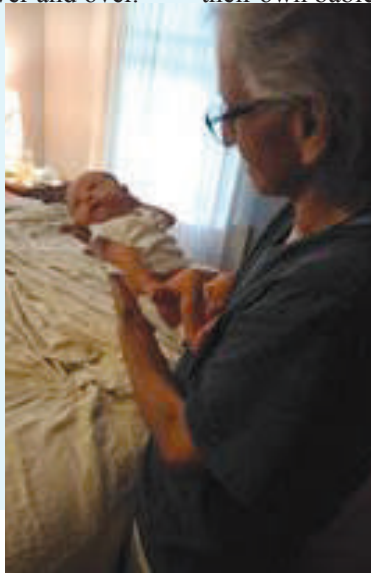
In the meantime, me and my sisters, Luna Wood, Jennifer Alvarado, and midwife, Yesenia Guzman at 7th Generation Birth Services and the American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions in San Antonio, Texas are helping to improve the maternal death rate in Texas. Our services are free for expectant parents, adopting parents and parents of children under 3 years of age. We offer diapers, wipes and we have a free clothing closet. Most of all, we offer a cultural connection with our pláticas-talks, that allows our parents some relief. It is totally possible to take back our right to birth—how we want to birth our children.

According to the 2022 Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Committee and Department of State Health Joint Biennial Report in The Texas Tribune by Eleanor Klibanoff on December 16, 2022, the report estimates 90% of maternal deaths could have been preventable. Give us a call, let's change the statistics for all women and let's set up an appointment.

The Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee report, delayed by more than three months, estimates that up to 90% of the deaths may have been preventable and we can be part of that.

BIO: *Ariban Chagoya is a 21st century Indigenous Elder curandera. She considers herself a helper not a healer. Something else does the healing. She is also a Doula or Childbirth Companera/ Comadre and works at the American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Mission: San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign: 7th Generation Birth Services in San Antonio, Texas. She is also in private practice as a sobadora/ curandera in San Antonio, A writer, a poet and artist. She is Chichimeca and a mestiza mix of culturas.*

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Ariban contemplates the miracle of birth.

