

EDUCATION

Male Delivery

Eddie Santiago gives birth to a new concept: A man as midwife

By TONI L. KAMINS

When Eddie Santiago finishes school next month, he won't be just another guy with a diploma: He'll be one of a handful of male midwives in the entire country. And he may face more than just a few questioning looks by colleagues and patients.

As a midwife, Santiago will confront the view that what he does is, well, woman's work. And it's not only men who might believe that — some women do, too. The politics surrounding the birth process is a heady one and while some women would fight hard to open up other professions to their own gender, those same women don't necessarily want men encroaching on their birth rites.

But Santiago has been defying convention for some time now. Even by 1989, when he received a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from CUNY's Lehman College, male nurses were still the exception to the female rule. And when he chose to specialize in labor and delivery nursing at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital, he walked into a bastion of female nurses and female midwives caring for female patients.

"The animosity was there the minute I walked into the delivery room. You know, things like, 'What's a man doing here?' Some people thought I was gay. I had to defend my masculinity right from the beginning."

Generally, the only men who were around were fathers and male obstetricians. A male nurse in labor and delivery was such an oddity that Santiago was often mistaken for a doctor.

"Some patients assumed I was a doctor. And some perceived me as having more authority as a nurse just because I was a man."

So it's easy to see why gender bias might prevail in the field of midwifery. The word "midwife" comes from German and simply means with woman. In professional and practical terms, a midwife cares for a woman during pregnancy and labor, and then delivers her baby. But today's highly educated and rigorously trained midwives also perform routine gynecological examinations, handle minor health problems, write prescriptions, counsel on family planning and related health concerns and work with women and their families on new-baby care.

Though still used predominantly by poor women who historically have had little access to high-tech health care, over the last two decades the use of midwives in hospital deliveries by women of all socio-economic groups has risen dramatically.

But among the general public, midwives are often regarded with suspicion. Misconceptions, stereotypes and questions about competence are common. Many people falsely equate all



HUSBAND AND MIDWIFE: Eddie Santiago (l.) trains with students at SUNY Downstate Medical Center.

HELAYNE SEIDMAN

midwifery with home births. And the mere mention of the word to some people conjures up visions of Scarlett and Prissy struggling to "birth" a baby while Atlanta burned.

A discussion on the women-only forum on ECHO, the ultra-trendy, Manhattan-based computer bulletin board system, yielded these responses about men as midwives:

■ Karen Rose: "Never in a million years. . . There is something unholy about men who want to be in that profession . . . for a man to want to be a midwife, not a nurse or a doctor, seems

Santiago loved working in labor and delivery. He loved to see the beginning of life. And he was good at it. But he quickly realized that his role would be limited if he remained a nurse.

"I was drawn to the level of care I could give to the individual patient as a midwife," Santiago said.

So since last August, Santiago has been the only man in a class of 23 registered nurses studying to become Certified Nurse Midwives at the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn (aka Downstate Medical Center). Nationwide, men make up just 1% of the 5,000-member American College of Nurse Midwives.

Acceptance into the highly competitive program didn't guarantee an attitude-free environment. Some of Santiago's classmates were suspicious of him at first. Some are still. But where some questioned his commitment or his intentions, others like Sonja Young — a midwife for more than 20 years in the Caribbean and England, now studying for her U.S. license — were impressed that he was there at all. So much so that one day early in the term she took him aside and said, "I'm going to make sure you graduate."

Negative attitudes have only been one component of Santiago's midwifery training. Students must practice examinations on each other before they can work with patients. This means observing the female anatomy and learning how to give exams. Each student has a partner and exams are performed under faculty supervision. Santiago's female stand-in was his wife. "Seeing my own wife go through it just added to my compassion," remarked Santiago.

"I really think Eddie's got what it takes to be a midwife," says classmate Sheila Townsend. "And that's not something I would have said at the beginning of the term."

(Toni L. Kamins is a New York-based freelance writer.)

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very strange."

■ Terry Wolfisch Cole: "I want to deliver with a woman at the helm. . . Childbirth and pregnancy are all about women helping women. . . [It] is the ultimate sisterhood support network. There is no way I would have a man delivering my baby, especially one who was not an M.D."

So what is a man like Santiago doing in this age-old woman's profession? He likes the work!