



Jessica Gondela

Babycatching in Cartagena

By Diana Janopaul

As a midwifery student, I had the opportunity to travel with three other students to Cartagena, Colombia to spend ten days in a maternity clinic delivering babies. Harmony, Jen, and Cindy comprised the team from The Florida School of Traditional Midwifery. We rotated through eleven-hour shifts, day and night, covering 22 hours every day. We labored with the women, caught babies, did newborn exams and postpartum checks, and then returned to our preceptor's home to eat, shower, and sleep.

We each delivered more than 25 babies in those ten days. We saw women giving birth in conditions that would be considered horrifying here—no sheets on the beds, families not allowed in, no support at all. We watched medical students, interns and residents utilize practices that, to us, are outdated and unnecessary. We saw these same caregivers make do with limited, or non-existent, supplies such as electricity and Chux pads. I witnessed unforgettable situations and met women who experienced impossible pain with bravery.

One of these women was Rosa, a dark-skinned beauty, very young and sweet. She was being induced for pre-eclampsia, even though she had not one sign or symptom of being pre-eclamptic. Her labor was long and hard, and the doctors were beginning to talk of a C-section. She was the last woman laboring at the end of our first shift. Harmony went to her, put her arms around her and began to dance. They swayed together and Harmony began to sing.

Woman am I.
Spirit am I.

I am the infinite within my soul.
I have no beginning and I have no end.
All this I am.

I joined in, putting my arms around them both. We sang to her and swayed our hips in time. It was such a victory to welcome that beautiful baby into the world, not long before our first shift ended.

Maria, a small woman of Native American descent, was laboring with her fourth baby. She was the “old woman” on the ward, giving encouragement to the younger girls around her. After many hours of slow, painful labor, the doctor decided to perform a C-section. The section couldn't happen, however, until her family was located outside the clinic so

that they could pay for the surgery. She was hysterical from the pain and cold—operating rooms are kept at near-arctic temperatures. She was especially mortified that she was naked—there were no such things as hospital gowns there—and the cloth they had tried to cover her with kept slipping off. I will never forget holding her in my arms while the anesthesiologist, finally, administered the epidural. She looked up and kissed me on the forehead and said, “Gracias.” I kissed her back, through the surgical mask I was wearing. “De nada.”

One day I found Harmony crying in the dank, cramped bathroom the laboring women used. She said that she couldn't take the disregard for the women or the brutal exams performed on the women. I had gone to comfort her, but somehow ended up crying as well. We heard a knock on the door and I opened it to find Manuel, our favorite intern. I tried to explain to him that for us birth is not just a medical procedure, but rather, a sacred event, that, as midwives, we have tender hearts that... “Break easily,” he finished my statement. He told us that he also has a soft heart that was often broken there, that he didn't like the way the women were treated, but that he had to work within the system there to achieve his goal of becoming a doctor. We ended up in a group hug in that dingy little bathroom.

Our last day, we delivered the baby of a seventeen-year-old

young lady named Tanya. Tanya's last name was “Valiente,” which means “brave” in Spanish. And brave she was. She would grab Harmony's long braid and pull her head back with each contraction, then kiss her and apologize afterwards! During the hardest part of her labor, she began to beg—not for pain relief, which was not even an option in the clinic—but for a “gaseosa”—a soda. At first, I tried to convince her that water was a much better choice, but as I watched that young girl make her journey into womanhood, I decided that she darn well deserved a soda. I sent someone to buy her an orange drink, which she sipped out of a plastic bag with a straw. It was soon after her last sip that her little boy was born. He was tiny like his mama and born with a clubbed foot. We covered them both in flowers that we had brought in for our last day—marigolds for healing.

Even telling you all of these things doesn't convey the intensity of the experience. After we returned, I craved being with Harmony, Cindy and Jen, because they alone could understand the way I was feeling. Harmony and I still can't sing our song together without crying.

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