

LABOR OF LOVE

Story by Danie Koskan
Photos by Matt Harrelson



Jeanne holds her newest arrival.

Jeanne Prentice lives life with arms wide open.

The 53-year-old Spearfish woman “catches” babies for a living. She tends to expectant and laboring mothers and welcomes their sons and daughters into the world. And she does it all from the comfort of home.

Jeanne holds the distinction of being one of South Dakota’s first legal home-birth midwives. She moved

her Wyoming practice to Spearfish in July 2008 after changes in state law permitted her and other licensed and certified nurse midwives to help women give birth at home. Jeanne figures she’s assisted in enough births to populate a small town. “I’ve caught a couple thousand,” she said.

Jeanne views her services as more of a lifelong calling than a business. Her great-grandmother was the community midwife in her small Pennsylvania town. Her father served as a gynecologist and obstetrician in the U.S. Army. She was 15 when her father extended a dinner invitation to the nurse midwife who assisted him. Jeanne remembers eagerly listening to the German woman over dinner as she described her role in the birth process and plucked anecdotes from her storied vocation.

Her young listener was hooked. Jeanne admired the woman’s compassion and expertise. “I knew enough about birth from my dad,” she said. “I knew it wasn’t easy. I remember thinking how nice it would be to have someone like her there.”

Jeanne made two life-changing decisions that evening: She would become a nurse midwife and deliver her children with one by her side. “I had thought I was going to be a nurse,” she said. “After that, I wanted to be a nurse midwife.”

Jeanne’s nursing career didn’t begin at the bedside of laboring women. She got her feet wet as a critical care nurse. The skills she developed working in emergency situations serve her well today in the home-birth setting. She also stuck to her personal birth plan. She enlisted the aid of a midwife for each of her three pregnancies. She delivered her daughter Aneilia, named after her great-grandmother, and sons William and Nathan at home.

Jeanne’s midwifery pursuits eventually evolved into

a desire to open her own practice. But it wasn't until years later that her dream materialized. Hospitals and physicians operate most of South Dakota's midwifery services. Until 2008, state law didn't recognize nurse midwives as independent practitioners and banned them from attending home births.

In the meantime, Jeanne argues, women dead-set against delivering their babies in a hospital put themselves at risk. They still gave birth at home, but with little or no qualified help. "I actually started Womankind Midwifery because I saw that these women were doing unassisted births," she said.

Jeanne originally established Womankind Midwifery one mile from the South Dakota border in Beulah, Wyo., where nurse midwives were already recognized as independent practitioners. She relocated to Spearfish two years later when the state lifted its restrictions.

Jeanne doesn't take her practice for granted. She logged several winters in Pierre making her case to South Dakota lawmakers. "I know what I'm doing serves a purpose," she said. "I'm keeping as many people as I possibly can from delivering unsafely at home."

Womankind Midwifery became the state's first legal home-birth service and midwife-owned practice in 2008. To celebrate midwifery's hard-fought milestone in South Dakota, Jeanne launched a new motto: "One small step for newborns, one giant leap for womankind."

The motto adorns a bench that sits on the lawn of her practice.

Jeanne never anticipated having to lobby so hard for her profession, but she's happy to have cleared the way for other nurse midwives who want to open their own home-birth service. "If I did anything, that's what I'm most happy with, that somehow, we got a voice in South Dakota," she said.

Jeanne's patients stretch from the Big Horns to the Badlands. Many of them hail from the most remote and rural areas of South Dakota and Wyoming. She jokes it often takes a half hour just to make it down

the driveway. She doesn't do much advertising. She doesn't have to sell herself. The majority of her clientele seeks her out. Take, for instance, a recent patient from Omaha, Nebr. This very pregnant woman piled into a car with her husband and mother and drove 10 hours to give birth at a Spearfish cottage. It wasn't that she wanted a South Dakota birth certificate. She wanted Jeanne by her side when she went into labor.

Some might call it job security. Jeanne credits God for blessing her endeavors. "The Lord sustains me," she said. She makes no apologies for her faith. She informs would-be patients up front that she'll be lifting them and their unborn children up in prayer. Her disclaimer hasn't been bad for business.

Scott Prentice knows he may sound biased, but he can't think of anyone more qualified to care for women than his wife. "Jeanne is so knowledgeable," he said, adding that it's not just smarts and experience that make her so valuable. She is truly happy in her work, he said, and that joy and contentment permeate everything she says and does.

Scott said he feels like "an unofficial part of the team." When the phone rings at 2 a.m., it's Scott's wake-up call, too. While Jeanne packs her bag for another special delivery, Scott brews some coffee for the road.

Perhaps husband and wife are so perfect for one another because they share the same entrepreneurial spirit. Each saw what was lacking in their community

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and did something about it. Jeanne brought a home-birth service to western South Dakota and eastern Wyoming, and Scott founded Black Hills Portal, a Web site that covers local news, sports, business and

who lose their way in the woods.

It's the perfect way to unwind at the end of a long workday. Caring for pregnant women isn't a 9-to-5 deal. Babies, after all, don't stick to grown-ups' schedules.



Jeanne holds one of her special deliveries, 10-month old Hadley Burch, pictured with his mom, Anna.

community events.

The pair built a house near Terry Peak about 10 years ago. Jeanne was working as a contract nurse midwife at the time, and she and Scott wanted out of Rapid City. It's a bit of a haul to get to work. Scott works out of an office in Lead, and Jeanne commutes 45 minutes to Spearfish.

Living tucked away in the forest has its advantages. Interruptions are few, except for the occasional request for directions from four-wheeling visitors

Jeanne averages half a dozen births a month. Sometimes her pint-size patients arrive back-to-back. In January, Jeanne welcomed four babies in five days. That's in addition to the busy schedule of prenatal appointments she keeps with pregnant clients and the numerous postpartum visits she makes to moms and their newborns.

Jeanne stresses that midwifery is about more than just taking care of women. "It's about having a relationship with them," she said.

Giving birth at home isn't for everyone, said Jeanne, who takes only low-risk patients. She prefers to work with women who have previously delivered a baby and are committed to giving birth without an epidural or other medication.

Jeanne does give her patients the option of having a water birth in their homes. She brings along a portable pool that permits women to assume any position that is most comfortable for labor and delivery. It's Jeanne's own version of an epidural. "I call it my aquadural," she said.

Allison Coin delivered her three-year-old son Edan in a hospital. When the 25-year-old Spearfish woman learned she and her husband, Jaime, were expecting their second child, home sounded like a more inviting place to deliver a baby. She contacted Jeanne, and the rest is history. Allison, Jaime, and Jeanne welcomed Lava Natalie into the world at 2:30 a.m. on Jan. 12.

"It was nice to be home," Allison said.

Jeanne said she feels privileged to be an invited guest at the arrival of something so precious as a baby. "I have the best job in the world," she said. "I hear other people say that and think, 'No, you don't.'"

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