

## **Not the Kind of House for a Home Birth**

by Emily Sinagra  
*Web Exclusive*

When I called my mother and said I was thinking about having a home birth, she screamed, "Oh my God, why? What's wrong with the Birth Center? It's just like home, isn't it?"

True, the Birth Center where I'd had my daughter, Dominique, six years earlier was homey enough, and it was definitely alternative enough for my mother. I'd been very happy with the experience-except for the fact that we had arrived only 10 minutes before the baby was born.

"Mom, I don't want to have to go out in the freezing cold again. I barely made it to the Birth Center when I had Dominique. I want to stay home and have people come to me."

"Yes, but who?"

"I have a great midwife, and she has medical backup. I'll go to the hospital if there's an emergency."

"Has she seen your house? It doesn't seem like the kind of house for a home birth."

"You were born at home," I reminded her.

"Yes, but we had a cook and a maid. And what about those animals?"

It's true that we have a few animals--three cats, a dog, two cockatiels, a goldfish, and a rabbit. And, okay, homemaking has never been one of my strong points.

I hung up and assessed the situation: the sink clogged with dishes, a huge pile of clothes cascading from the washer and dryer. It would take me an hour just to clear off the table, which held Elmer's Glue, a loaf of bread, a blue magic marker, two nails, a hammer, a rabbit-food holder, a pan of water in case the cockatiel that had just landed on my head felt like a dip, a half-eaten orange lollypop, an assortment of Band-aids, a copy of Practical Horseman, a sprinkling of Cheerios, and more.

Obviously, my mother was right. The birth part of home birth was no problem; it was the home part I wouldn't be able to handle. How could I even think of inviting Shannon, the midwife, and her assistants into the house? Not only would I have to do some serious tidying up before, but I'd also have to wash all those sheets afterwards. The Birth Center, on the other hand, offered maid service. A lot like checking into a hotel, one with Mary Cassatt prints on the walls, a spotless bathroom, even a Jacuzzi.

But every pregnancy has its own irresistible cravings (lemon squares, red licorice, grapefruit juice), and this time mine was home. That night I dreamed that I was showing Shannon around my house. To my surprise, it was not a tangled mess of stray socks and birdseed but a well-ordered, harmonious home. There were bookshelves, maple cabinets, and drawers of perfect proportions, even floral arrangements and matching bedspreads. Shannon oohed and aahed her approval. I woke up knowing that I had made the right decision. I felt like calling my mother and saying, "Yes, Mother, Shannon has seen my house, and it's fine!"

Soon I was demonstrating skills I never knew I had. I made lined curtains with valances for every window in the house. I consulted how-to books and ironed, measured, and cut late into the night. My husband stood back, mouth open, as I dashed out the door: "Just one more trip to the fabric store, honey. I need to make pillows to match the curtains."

I cleaned out closets, painted the bedroom, and scrubbed the bathroom with a toothbrush. Then came the fun of ordering birthing supplies: receiving blankets, cord clamps, hot water bottle, thermometer, baby cap, large plastic bowls. I became a powerful organizer, assigning jobs. My friend Charlotte, who is a poet, was in charge of beauty. She brought a planter of spring bulbs and CDs of Brahms. Diana, a nurse, brought her stethoscope, comfrey compresses, and a pot of black bean soup with cornbread.

When labor finally started, I had been ready for a month. I awoke with mild contractions at 3:30 a.m. I went downstairs and vacuumed. I took the corn bread and black bean soup out of the freezer to thaw; the midwives would be hungry. While my daughter and husband slept, I took a shower. Then I wandered through the three rooms of my home, drying my hair. I prayed. It all had been a prayer--the gathering, the readying, the attention to myself--a prayer of blessing and gratitude.

At dawn I called the midwife and my friends, Charlotte and Diana. The snow outside was pink, reflected throughout the house. I woke my husband. Our second child was about to be born.

When all my attendants had arrived, I lay down for a moment on the living room couch to let them listen to the baby's heart and take my blood pressure. Then I served them corn bread, black bean soup, and raspberry tea. It was a party, subdued and respectful, but still a joyous gathering of friends. I leaned against the table for a contraction.

"Emily, go upstairs," my friends told me. "You're about to have a baby, you know."

"Can't I get you more soup?" I joked.

My daughter, Dominique, pressed her small fist against my lower back. The midwife's assistant, who was five months pregnant with her first child, said, "Wow, you sure are doing a good job of staying relaxed between contractions." Everything was so unhurried that I wondered if it was really going to happen. I associated labor with panic, jumping into the car, rushing about.

"Don't worry," said the midwife, pouring herself another cup of tea. "You don't have to go anywhere. You can be romantic." Romantic. Now there was a concept.

I found that if I lay down, the contractions subsided, so I put my arms around my husband's neck, and we danced. I sang, I moaned. As the contractions began to crescendo, I hung on for balance, my feet spread wide.

The labor unfurled like a wave. I remained standing until the last moment. There were only six minutes of pushing. Elena crowned at 8:21 a.m. and was born, literally the next minute, at 8:22. She flew out, one hand leading, like a trapeze artist. Dominique wrapped the first receiving blanket around her sister.

I bled quite a bit. Shannon shot me with pitocin and I stopped bleeding. I needed stitches. Diana held the baby while Shannon and her assistant crouched between my legs with needle and thread. I never went to the hospital. Instead, I was served scrambled eggs on my grandmother's china and juice in one of Diana's mugs. Then I rested in my bed, nursing my new baby, while my friends and family saw to the dishes and the laundry. Amen.

*Emily Sinagra, writer, mother, homebirth advocate, and La Leche League member, lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with her husband, Joe, a commercial fisherman, and their three children: Dominique (11), Elena (5) and Tristan (19 months)--plus an African Grey parrot, a dog, three cats, two cockatiels, one parakeet, and numerous tropical fish.*