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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

She Spent Her Career as a Job Counselor. Now She's a Doula.

Linda Spencer provides support to mothers during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. It's hard work, but rewarding.



Linda Spencer, 64, started working regularly as a doula at Boston Medical Center in January. She says she feels like this is “God’s work.”

PHOTO: JENNA SPENCER

By *Julie Halpert*

April 10, 2021 11:24 am ET



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Ever since she felt “railroaded” into having her two children by caesarean, she says, Linda Spencer has been eager to help expecting mothers.

This year she got her chance to singularly pursue this passion.

Ms. Spencer, who is 64, started working regularly as a doula in January at the Birth Sisters program at Boston Medical Center. A doula is a trained, nonclinical health professional who provides intellectual, physical and emotional support to mothers during

pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period. Ms. Spencer underwent training and certification in 2019, and worked occasionally at the hospital last year.

Ms. Spencer says she first meets with people giving birth to discuss their needs. She teaches them about the labor process, breathing techniques and different positions, and about hydrotherapy and other options in assisting deliveries. “We are trying to create a calming environment to facilitate a positive and memorable birth experience,” she says. Then, once it is time, she is with the mother throughout labor.

LINDA SPENCER

AGE: 64

HOMETOWN: Cambridge, Mass.

PRIMARY CAREER: Career counseling

CURRENT PATH: Doula, Boston Medical Center

WHY THIS PATH: “I’m grateful to be part of the labor and delivery team, helping to do my part, one family at a time, to address the continued and tragic Black maternal mortality crisis in America.”

Ms. Spencer was born near Boston Medical Center. “I grew up in that neighborhood, on welfare in the inner city. It’s important for me to be giving back to my community of origin,” she says. The hospital serves primarily low-income Black and Brown families, including some refugees and immigrants.

She spent most of her career providing job counseling to students of all ages at Harvard University, most recently as director of career services at the Harvard Extension School, a continuing-education program.

But the desire to assist with childbirths kept calling to her. So, when Harvard offered her early retirement in December, she saw her opportunity.

For now, because of the pandemic, video calls are used for initial sessions with the mothers and for post-birth assistance. But Ms. Spencer is present for each birth. She has been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 since Jan. 15.

“I’m not a religious person, but I’m very spiritual,” she says. “I feel like this is God’s work. It was a little bit scary going into the hospital that first time, but I really wasn’t afraid.”

Given the unpredictability of a birth, Ms. Spencer can be on her feet 20 hours at a time, and often goes without sleep or food. At a birth in January, she stayed for 22 hours until the baby was born. Two days later, she was at a 17-hour birth.

It takes its toll, she says. But she hopes to continue for five years.

She says she is grateful to be “helping to do my part, one family at a time, to address the continued and tragic Black maternal mortality crisis in America.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that for 2018, the maternal-mortality rate for Black women of both non-Hispanic and Hispanic origin was 37.3 per 100,000 live births, compared with 14.9 for white women of non-Hispanic origin and 11.8 for those of Hispanic origin.

Being at a birth never gets old, Ms. Spencer says.

“It’s sacred and it’s magical to be witness and to hold space for this event in someone’s life,” she says. “It just brings tears to me each and every time.”

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