



# OUR BODIES OURSELVES

SPRING 2008 NEWSLETTER



## INSPIRING A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT OF WOMEN'S HEALTH

### ◆ *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth: Launching a New Wave of Awareness* By Judy Norsigian, Executive Director

Traveling around the country for our new book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth*, has been both a privilege and an eye-opener about how options for childbearing women can vary so greatly from one city to the next. I have met with hundreds of midwives, obstetricians, family practice physicians, childbirth educators, pregnant women, recent moms, and expectant parents. Many contributors to this comprehensive evidence-based resource also participated in these events.

Feedback on the new book has been overwhelmingly positive and a tribute to the 130 or so writers, reviewers, and other contributors. Their careful research, thoughtful input, and attention to detail have resulted in an extraordinary endorsement by Dr. Timothy R.B. Johnson, chief of ob-gyn at the University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor. (See our website to read his letter explaining why they have purchased 4,000 copies of the book to provide to every woman seeking prenatal care there in the coming year: <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/about/johnson.asp>).

Some women especially appreciate that we have included the oft-neglected concerns of women with HIV, lesbian mothers, women dealing with domestic violence, women with disabilities, and others with special needs. Many women came up to me describing how much they loved the first chapter, which creates a "climate of confidence," offsetting a disturbing "climate of doubt and fear" that seems to pervade our present culture. They appreciated the straightforward information, the absence of condescension, and the avoidance of language that might foster guilt in a woman whose birthing choices or experiences turned out to be not as she had hoped.

Some communities lamented recent cutbacks to or elimination of nurse-midwifery services, while others celebrated expanded

midwifery services and new training models that included nurse-midwifery faculty for both medical and midwifery students. Many noted the stellar outcomes of nurse-midwives. For example, at Group Health in Seattle, where nurse-midwives attend about 60% of births, the cesarean section rate is now about 12%, roughly a third of the national average.

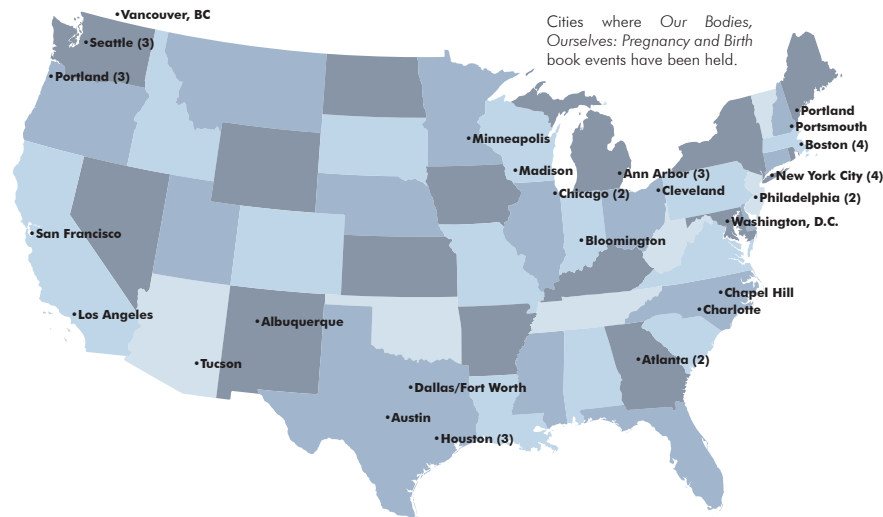
Many noted the growing lack of access to VBACs across the country as one reason for the alarming rise in cesarean rates. Some women I met in Texas told me that their main reason for choosing a free-standing birth center (there are more than 40 in Texas) was to avoid an initial cesarean, so they would not have to face the

prospect of a forced cesarean during a second or third birth. (The latest medical research has confirmed significantly greater risks for moms with each subsequent cesarean section delivery, making cesarean prevention more important than ever.) One of my favorite "activist" stories at the end of *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth* is the campaign launched by Barbara Stratton and her colleagues to restore VBAC option in

their local Maryland hospital. She ended with an excellent strategy that women are now considering to restore VBAC options in hospitals across the country.

In mid-April, one woman I met in Philadelphia mentioned the now-infamous *Time/CNN* article titled "Choosy Mothers Choose Cesareans" (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1731904,00.html>). With distorted articles like this down playing the true risks of caesareans, it is not surprising that so many women (and men) have an inadequate understanding of the risks of surgical birth.

In Madison, WI, where 60 people gathered at A Room of One's Own (one of the few independent women's bookstores *continued...*





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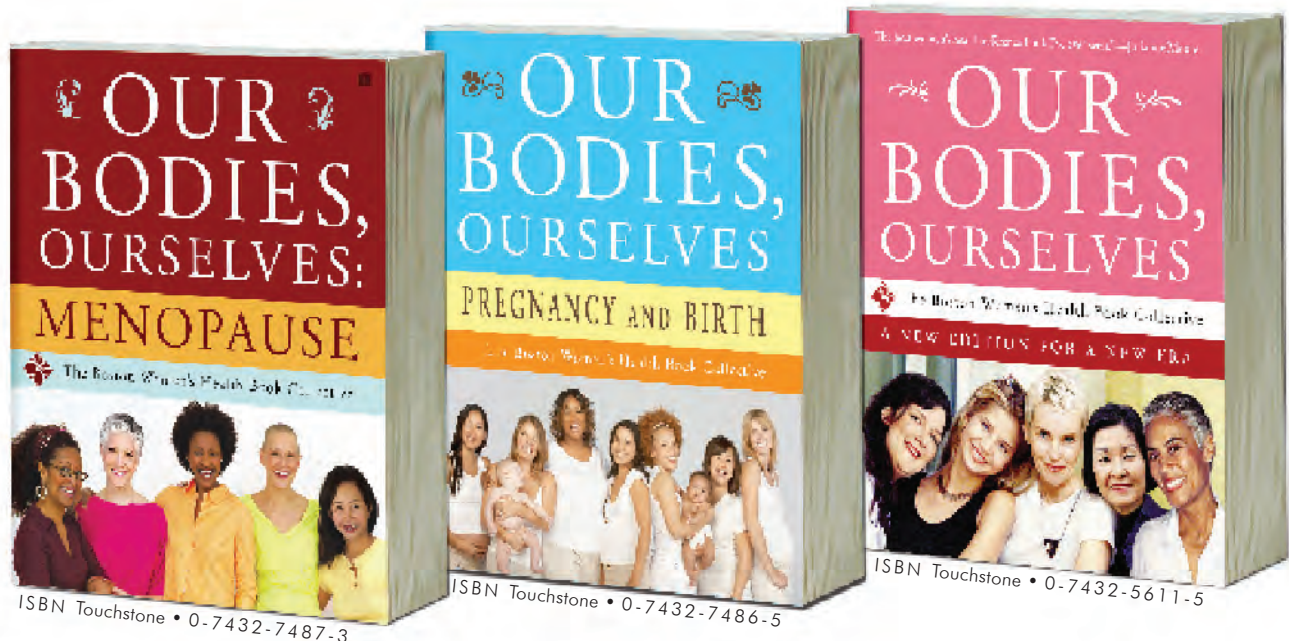
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## Give the Gift of Knowledge

Remember your first encounter with *Our Bodies, Ourselves*? Every day at the OBOS office we hear from people like you whose lives were forever changed because someone gave them a copy. Why not give that feeling to someone you care about and purchase one of the *Our Bodies, Ourselves* titles for a wedding, birthday, graduation, or "just because" gift?

All of our titles can be purchased at [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org) or anywhere books are sold.



## ◆ From the Board of Directors Co-Chairs

June 2008

Dear Friend,

We are pleased to share good news about recent accomplishments at Our Bodies Ourselves and to ask for your continued support.

In March 2008, OBOS' newest book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Childbirth*, garnered fantastic reviews and widespread acclaim. Sales continue to be brisk, as women all over the country are buying the book for the clearly written, evidence-based information accompanied by women's personal experiences with pregnancy and birth. Executive Director Judy Norsigian is now promoting the book in several dozen cities, appearing at gatherings large and small, radio and television programs, and conferences and symposia. She is hearing first-hand about how unique and helpful this new resource is for both women and caregivers. The chief of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Michigan Health System in Ann Arbor has purchased 4,000 copies of the book for all women seeking prenatal care there during the coming year. And we urge you to contact your local hospitals to do the same. If you haven't picked up your copy yet, do buy one today, either online or at your local bookstore. It will make a great gift for any prospective mother – and father – that you know.

In addition to producing the new book, OBOS staff worked throughout the fall and winter on the other activities so important to women's health – supporting groups in other countries now translating and adapting OBOS materials for their own use, advocacy on vital women's health issues, and production of *Our Bodies, Our Blog*, a source of health information delivered daily to thousands of email boxes and checked online by many others as well. All of this and more is detailed in the enclosed newsletter.


We need your support to continue these important activities.

Please use the enclosed envelope to send in your most generous gift today, or pledge online through our secure website at [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org).

Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

  
Amanda Buck Varella  
Co-Chair

  
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**Cover Story Continued...**

left in the country), two women shared profoundly moving stories. One, with her healthy 3-month old baby in arms, told of her attempted home birth and her nervousness about transferring to a hospital when it became clear to her midwife that it would be necessary. She found the caregivers at the hospital to be supportive and sympathetic, making the birth experience more positive than she had expected. Most important, she did not at all feel like she had “failed” or was somehow “inadequate,” demonstrating the importance of good counseling throughout labor, birth, and postpartum. Another woman whose first birth ended with a stillborn baby described how she kept producing milk for weeks afterwards and donated it to a local breast milk bank – the “gift” of her son, as she put it, even in his very short life. She was near the end of her second pregnancy when we met and looking forward to having a healthy baby.

In Wisconsin, which is now one of 24 states that recognize and/or license Certified Professional Midwives (who attend women primarily in the home setting), more than 1,200 women chose home births and free-standing birth centers. It also became clear to me that respectful collaborations between midwives and doctors were an important ingredient in making home births as safe and satisfying as possible. Interestingly, several people approached me about the supportive language on home birth in the statement published jointly by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and Royal College of Midwives in the United Kingdom (see <http://www.rcog.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=2023>) and wondered why it was such a contentious issue for most obstetricians in the United States.

In so many ways, it is clear that our new book will be useful as an advocacy tool and a practical resource for individual women and their families. For example, a short sidebar about reintroducing nitrous oxide into U.S. hospitals as one option for coping with pain during labor has generated interest in advocating for nitrous oxide in several hospitals and health care systems. This controversial topic is more fully explored at our popular blog ([http://ourbodiesourblog.org/blog/2008/05/post\\_5.php](http://ourbodiesourblog.org/blog/2008/05/post_5.php)). The book will also be useful in several states where advocates are now working toward the licensure and regulation of Certified Professional Midwives (trained direct-entry midwives who practice primarily in the home setting). Illinois, Massachusetts, and Missouri are three such states.

At a reception hosted by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, staff mentioned their increasing interest in disaster-preparedness and what communities will have to do in the instance of pandemic flu. Since pregnant women at term would not be able to give birth in local hospitals dealing with pandemic flu, emergency home birth kits and greater access to free-standing birth centers could become especially critical resources. Later, a reception and panel presentation at the Feminist Women’s Health Center prompted further discussion about the need to restore the once-thriving nurse-midwifery practice at Grady Hospital.



OBOS: Pregnancy and Birth book contributors at a Seattle event. (L to R): Toni Weschler, April Bolding, Judy Norsigian, Penny Simkin, Janelle Taylor, and Christine Morton



Judy Norsigian (2nd from L) with Texas Women’s University faculty at one of many Houston, TX events.

The new book has prompted an invitation from the journal *BIRTH* to write about some of the challenges in the “making” of *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth*. Kiki Zeldes, OBOS webmaster and co-editor for this new book, is the lead author for this article, which will be published early next winter. Stay tuned.

Interested in sponsoring a book event in your area? Contact Wendy Brovold at [wendy@bwhbc.org](mailto:wendy@bwhbc.org) for more information.

## ***Our Bodies, Ourselves* in Nepal: The Global Translation/Adaptation Program**

In our effort to increase access to evidence-based information on health and sexuality, the Global T/A Program provides technical assistance to women's groups around the world as they translate and culturally adapt *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for women and girls in their countries. Over the years we have been honored to collaborate with women who, despite enormous odds, break new ground with their adapted materials. Here we highlight our partner in Nepal, a group that has shown exemplary leadership and commitment to women's rights in the only country in the world where women have a lower life expectancy than men.

The Women's Rehabilitation Center (WOREC) is adapting *Our Bodies, Ourselves* into seven booklets in Nepali for audiences that include government agencies, NGOs, health trainers and providers, social workers, medical students and researchers. This spring they will begin publication with booklets on "Women's Health and Factors Affecting Health" and "Body Politics," followed by five more on various women's health issues by 2008 year end. Excerpts from the booklets will also soon be available in Nepali on our website.

Despite ongoing socio-political tension as Nepal transitions to a fledgling democracy, modest funding, and limited resources, WOREC has capitalized on 15 years of experience in women's health and grassroots activism to overcome challenges, engage the community, and build strategic alliances. In 2007, for example, they organized a National Consultation for 300 Women Human Rights Defenders and received critical input on the booklets. In another instance, 25 barefoot gynecologists trained by WOREC on the principles of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* organized a health fair during which 4,000 women received materials based on the booklets and 1,500 elected to undergo health self-examinations. WOREC's untiring advocacy and success at the national policy level are also impressive and include collaborations with other activists to facilitate the inclusion of reproductive health and rights in the interim constitution, and a new national strategy on prolapsed uterus in partnership with the UNFPA and Health Ministry. In yet another coup, the coordinator has been nominated as a civil society candidate for the upcoming constituent assembly election, and if elected, she will bring WOREC's and its partners' advocacy efforts to the forefront of health policy reform in Nepal.

We are delighted to have provided WOREC with two sub-grants made possible by a grant from Ipas. If you would like more information on the Global T/A Program and how you can support its efforts, please contact: Sally Whelan, Program Manager, at [sally@bwhbc.org](mailto:sally@bwhbc.org) or Ayesha Chatterjee, Program Associate, at [ayasha@bwhbc.org](mailto:ayasha@bwhbc.org).



A health counselor from WOREC disseminates information from the Nepali OBOS booklets to women at a health fair. Jwala Kwolekshyapat, WOREC

## **Congratulations Byllye Avery**

Byllye Avery, OBOS Advisory Board member and founder of the National Black Women's Health Project, will receive the Ruth Bader Ginsberg Award for a Pioneer in Women's Rights at the Impact Awards sponsored by the Chicago Foundation for Women in 2008. The staff and board of OBOS thank Byllye for her commitment to women's health and rights, and congratulate her on this wonderful recognition.

## **Google AdWords Grant Generates New Website Visits**

In the fall of 2007, OBOS received a Google AdWords grant that gives our website prominent listing in Google searches on topics related to women's health. We created several "campaigns" – including ones on pregnancy and birth, menopause, and abortion – that have informed web users about our website and have brought many new visitors to our site.

WWW.OURBODIESOURSELVES.ORG receives an average of 60,000 visits per month. Since the AdWords campaigns began last fall, we have received 12,000 to 13,000 new visits each month. OBOS thanks Google for their generous grant, which is raising our visibility and increasing women's access to reliable, objective information in the U.S. and beyond.

## **Our Bloggers Rock!**

Our awesome bloggers, Christine Cupaiuolo and Rachel Walden, continue to bring our web audience a fabulous daily dose of women's health news and analysis. *Our Bodies, Our Blog* (OBOS) reports on, reacts to, and analyzes the latest news, tactics, and scandals.

The blog continues to draw an ever-growing number of readers (close to 13,700 a month, the largest number of viewers any unique page on our site receives) and has attracted much praise. It is listed first in About.com: Pregnancy and Birth's Top 10 Blogs You Should Be Reading; included in an Utne Reader article on intriguing feminist blogs; and said to be a "fantastic blog... that rocks" (feministing.com), a "comprehensive womencentric blog" (The Breast Views Blog), and "a fabulous resource" (Sheroes) that readers should "make .. a daily read" (ALAS, A Blog). You can read the blog online at our website or subscribe to get the daily post in your email Inbox. Visit [www.ourbodiesourblog.com](http://www.ourbodiesourblog.com) to do so.

## **Stay Informed**

Interested in getting more frequent updates on OBOS? Sign up for our email newsletter! Just scroll to the bottom of our homepage, type in your email address, and hit "Go." It's that easy.

[www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org)

## Remembering Barbara Seaman

On February 27, 2008, pioneering women's health activist Barbara Seaman died. The following tribute was written by OBOS founder Norma Swenson. Please note the following paragraphs are only an excerpt, and the entire tribute can be read at [www.ourbodiesourselves.org](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org).

Barbara Seaman and I were of the same generation, yet we had led quite different lives when the emerging women's liberation movement brought us together in the early 70s. As a birthing reform activist I had already been following her health columns in women's magazines for some time and sensed a kindred spirit.

Barbara was a generous friend, a mentor, and an activist role model, as well as a writer. She was surely the godmother, if not the mother of the American women's health movement. There is no one else who took the kind of leadership she gave to all of us so energetically. Her fierce spirit was, I believe, what we most needed. She cannot ever be replaced, but that spirit can and must be kept alive, so oncoming generations will, I hope, draw inspiration from her work and from her marvelous example. I will miss her voice and her presence among us so much.



Attendees at a women's health conference in Washington, DC in the late 1990s. Front row (L to R): Sarah Kovner, Barbara Seaman, and Helen Rodriguez-Trias. Back row (L to R): Alice Dan, Helen Marieskind, Susan Wood, John Estrada, Byllye Avery, Judy Norsigian, Anne Kasper.

## One Blazing Glance: A Benefit Concert



The composer and performers from *One Blazing Glance*. Back row L to R: Beth Denisch and Winnie Dahlgren. Front row L to R: Kathryn Wright, Kathleen O'Brien, Felice Pomeranz, Wendy Rolfe, and Melissa Howe.

Last November, the Berklee College of Music, Our Bodies Ourselves, the Open Meadows Foundation, and the Simmons Institute for Leadership and Change presented the world premiere of *One Blazing Glance*. This benefit concert, the proceeds from which were donated to OBOS' Translation/Adaptation Program, featured a song cycle of seventeen poems, ancient and contemporary, by women poets from China, Korea, Romania, Nicaragua, Greece and Americans of African, Jewish, and Papago descent. The texts were an intimate, empowered, first-person portrayal of women at important moments in their lives. It was truly a memorable evening, and the staff and board of OBOS are grateful for the opportunity to work with such profoundly talented women.

The event would not have been possible without the support of the following businesses: Carberry's Bakery and Coffee House, Iggy's Breads, Massis Bakery, The Middle East Restaurant & Nightclub, Trader Joe's-Newton, and Whole Foods Market-Fresh Pond.

Thank You!

## Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth on the Web

As *Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth* hits the shelves, we've spend some time building up our website content on pregnancy and birth. Head over to [www.ourbodiesourselves.org/childbirth](http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org/childbirth) to find:

- Excerpts from the book, on topics ranging from sexuality during pregnancy to prenatal testing to postpartum mood disorders.
- Personal stories of women's experiences during labor and birth.
- Supplementary content not in the printed book, including information on the midwifery model of care and how it relates to and differs from the medical management model of care, tips for women of size on how they can best avoid having a cesarean section, and an overview and clips from several new films about birth.
- A "press room" for the book, which includes press releases, reviews and other media coverage of the book, downloadable images, a calendar of book celebrations and other events, and a Q&A with Judy Norsigian on the failings of our current maternity care system.
- A "look inside the book" feature, where people can browse through the book's introduction, table of contents, credits, and bios of the contributors.

Take a look yourself, then spread the word!