

## North Coast Midwife JENNIFER CHILDRESS

midwifery & women's choice of homebirth on the north coast



*I just like everything that is alive. I love tiny little baby plants and the potential of a sprouting seed becoming this amazing mature plant later in the summer, or years later, if it's a tree. I love animals, obviously (as a sleepy, long haired, purring cat hops into her lap), I always have. When I was a little kid, I thought I would be a veterinarian. [I love] the kinship amongst the plant kingdom, animal kingdom, and human beings; it's just all so wonderful to me.*

because birthing is so unique." Jennifer is quick to clarify that she, in no way, judges those who choose hospital births, "I think that there is a place for that. Like all animals, we need to find places that we feel safe, and if you feel safest at home, then it can be an empowering experience."

Empowering and supporting women and their families is exactly what Jennifer has committed her life to. She smiles ear to ear talking about the families and children whom she's worked with. She describes one of her favorite parts of her job as getting to spend time with siblings during prenatal visits. Often a toddler will hop into her lap and play "assistant" as she listens to



the unique opportunity to stay connected with the families that she's worked with long after the baby is delivered. This is just one of the many blessings she experiences working as a midwife here on the coast.

a woman and her family before, during and after birth. After three-and-a-half years into her apprenticeship, she found out that she was pregnant with her second daughter, and felt that she needed to put her training on hold. She didn't pursue midwifery again until her family relocated to the Oregon Coast many years later. After dabbling in a variety of other fields here on the coast, she ended up following her heart back to what she knew to be her purpose. She enrolled at Birthingway College of Midwifery in 2005. For three years she commuted to Portland one day a week, attending 12 hours of classes packed into that one day. Her fourth year consisted of taking specific supplemental classes on top-

I dodge a posse of ducks waddling across the windy gravel road as I drive up to the Childress's Nehalem farm. To the right there is an expansive garden surrounding a full glass-windowed green house. To the left cascades the goat pasture; the barn situated at the bottom of the hillside. Today, the goats are staying dry, all huddled together in the barn, brown eyes peeking out from the open door. If I'd come in the spring, chances are that I would have seen baby goats chasing after their mamas in the field. Instead, I am greeted by a large, shaggy-haired, white dog named Leche, and a smaller, short haired, foxy- black dog named Piper. Their farm house is simple and full of character. Vintage furniture, homeschool projects hanging from the



ceiling, dark hard-wood floors, and a hot wood stove; it's the perfect spot to sit and have a conversation about birth.

Jennifer Childress is mother to two teenage girls and wife to a writer and small business owner. She is a goat farmer, a master gardener, and a midwife. She is one of the only independent certified professional midwives on the North Oregon Coast. She travels from Tilla-

mook to Knappa, and even into Portland, assisting mothers who have chosen to deliver their babies at home. She gave birth to her own two babies, years ago, at home in Tennessee, midwived by her side. Her birthing experiences were what inspired her to pursue a path in midwifery. She saw, first hand, how important it is for women to have birthing choices suited to their own individual needs. "I think that it's important for women to have the choice to birth where they feel the safest," she explains. "[Homebirth] is not for everybody, but when it is for them, it's so incredible for a woman to be in her own space, with the life that she's created around her, with the people that she loves; and to have the freedom to do it in her own way...



baby's heartbeat and checks Mom's pulse. In some cases, she has assisted that very toddler into the world. With her practice being situated in our small, rural area, she has had

Jennifer began her career in midwifery 17 years ago as an apprentice in rural Tennessee. During this time she was also trained to be a doula - a nonmedical person who assists

ics such as breastfeeding and homeopathy. After completing her schooling, she continued on as an apprentice working with midwives from Portland who were willing to commute to the coast for births. She completed her apprenticeship much slower than most urban midwives-in-training do. This was a result of both a lack of certified midwives living on the coast that she could accompany to births, as well as, a smaller population of women desiring the assistance of a midwife. She views this in a positive light, as she does the pace of her current practice, because of the time she's been able to spend getting to know each family that she's worked with, as well as the reflection time that she's been allowed following each birth.



It's not surprising to me that Jennifer enjoys the slow pace of her practice here on the coast. If I were to match a word with her personality, it would be peaceful. She explains her style of midwifery as "hands off;" I see it as an inherent trust in what is to come. She attributes this to her experiences watching her animals give birth. "I actually love to just sit quietly and witness them in their process" she explains, "I don't have any desire to help it or fix it, or to give them an intervention." She goes on to say that, "women, when they give birth, are as close to being in their natural element as they can be, and, if you let it, it's incredible to just watch and bear witness to this process." She describes the process as "huge and lovely and unique," and she's cautious of disrupting it with any sort of intervention. She articulates by saying that "there are a lot of interventions that are just tiny little interventions, like telling someone how to push, or telling them to lower their voice, because low voices

are better at getting baby out... and they are well-meaning, but, if I can just be quiet and observe it, gosh, it is just amazing,"

Teaching women to trust their bodies and to trust their process is as much a part of Jennifer's job as is prenatal care and assisting in deliveries. She teaches this practice not because she has to, or because it will "help labor," but because she believes in it wholeheartedly. "We are designed for birth to work. We wouldn't be at this place on the planet with so many humans if it didn't work as well as it does," she says, but with a quiet understanding that things can and do go wrong. "I can see why people get afraid. I pray all the time for guidance and support in that process because

I don't want to be afraid, I want to trust it, because I believe that the outcomes are better when you do." At this point in her career, with over 100 babies delivered, she has never witnessed a tragedy, and she prays that she never will. She chooses to focus on the positive that is her reality. What

she witnesses in her practice are women being empowered, healed, and liberated by the chance to be involved in their own birth experience. Some of these women are pregnant again after undergoing a Cesarean section with a previous birth. None of the hospitals in our area, and very few hospitals nation-wide, will perform VBAC's (Vaginal Birth After Cesarean.) For this reason, women are seeking Jennifer out to assist them in having VBAC's in their own homes. These have been some of the most beautiful and healing experiences that Jennifer has ever witnessed. Watching a woman successfully birth her child vaginally, after thinking that she was unable to, is a powerful thing for both mother and midwife.

According to Jennifer, having a voice is one of the main reasons why women are choosing homebirths. Instead of signing off their "informed consent," they are opting to sign in their "informed choice." That basically means that they are doing



**THE DANTE** house is busy and happy. Children's art work hangs on the wall of their living room. There is a sun-lit homeschool room decorated with maps and books, with a sliding glass door opening up to the backyard where 13 egg-laying-chickens graze their spacious coup. Emily Dante's five children run in and out, enjoying the unusually sunny March day. Emily: mother, homemaker, and teacher to her children, holds her six-month-old, Jasper in her lap. Her oldest child, Hannah, is the ultimate hostess, chatting with my four-year-old and presenting me with a bouquet of flowers carefully tied together with a piece of red yarn.

Emily delivered her first two babies in the hospital. Although both of these experiences were positive, she and her husband, Erik, had begun to make changes in the way that they were feeding their family. These changes prompted further research on alternative ways of living; childbirth being among them. After much exploration and prayer, they decided that homebirth was a good option for them. "Women have been giving

## Emily Dante, Nehalem Mother, Wife, Homemaker, Teacher

birth for a very long time, and yes, the medical establishment is needed at times... but our first births went really well," says Emily. Although she did deliver her second child in the hospital, she didn't start receiving care until she was already six months pregnant. She was astounded to find out that they were still going to be charged a flat (hefty) rate for her care, even though she was only going to see her doctor a few times. This expense combined with the confidence that she had gained in her body's ability to give birth, made their future homebirth decisions easy. This was just reiterated after meeting Watt and Jennifer Childress for the first time and learning of Jennifer's practice here on the coast. She had three successful homebirths since then, with Jennifer by her side.

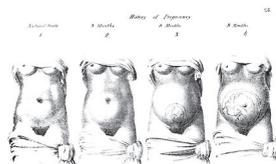
Emily's faith in her midwife's expertise is strong. "Midwives are so very knowledgeable about birth. They know just what to do and when," she says. What she appreciates most about homebirths and midwifery is the personal one-on-one care that she receives. She loves that it becomes a family event,



and that her older children can choose to be a part of it if they want to. She also loves that she can just stay home in her own space; she can sleep in her own bed and be with her family. She is comfortable before, during and after delivery.



**GENEVIEVE JOHNSON** decided to have a homebirth shortly after she found out that she was pregnant with her daughter, Jade Laser Johnson, now four weeks old. She wanted the birth of her first child to be as "low stress" as it could be. As an acupuncturist in Cannon Beach, Genevieve has met



and worked with many women who have had successful homebirths here on the coast. It was through those women that she came to hear about Jennifer Childress and her midwifery practice. After seeing a medical doctor a few times early in her pregnancy, she decided against that option and pursued a homebirth. The remainder of her prenatal care took place in the luxury of her own home.

When I asked her what she appreciated most about her homebirth experience,

## Genevieve Johnson, Cannon Beach Licensed Acupuncturist and owner of Acupuncture and Natural Medicine Clinic in Cannon Beach

she said that she loved "the intimacy between midwife and patient in comparison to how she felt in the hospital." Genevieve went on to express her gratitude for the time that Jennifer invested into both her prenatal care and her postpartum care. Her prenatal appointments were filled with discussions and questions, "there was even time for Jennifer to get familiarized with my pets," she recalls. This is a great example of the intimacy that Genevieve was referring to.

Genevieve's delivery was by no means easy. She labored for 52 hours and both she and Jade experienced some complications after delivery. Jennifer and her accompanying midwife were quick to provide the exact care that both baby and Mama needed, including calling the paramedics. By the time the emergency



vehicles arrived, Genevieve and Jade were stable and doing just fine. An intense finale to a very arduous labor, but Genevieve is recuperating well and feeling good. She looks upon her birthing experience with gratitude and joy. She is so thankful for the "personalized and holistic" care that she received from her midwives.

their own research, educating themselves, choosing whom they trust, and finding their own safe place to give birth. This will often prompt a spiral of informed choices that go beyond the birth of their children and extend into the daily lives of their families. Be it the food that



## Katie Voelke, Cannon Beach Executive Director of the North Coast Land Conservancy

**KATIE VOELKE** is glowing as she rocks her three month old, Elijah Forest Kirby, to sleep. Her house is peaceful and cozy, and we are surrounded by her four-year-old, August's, toys. He is at school this morning, giving my own two-year-old and four-year-old free reign over his work bench and play tools. Katie delivered August at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria. Jennifer Childress was by her side serving as her doula. Her hospital experience was good. She delivered her son naturally, easing her labor pains in the hospital's soaking tub. This first birthing experience proved to Katie what her body is capable

of. She witnessed and her instinctive ability to give birth. She also realized that the only needed with her Scott, and her

When Katie with Elijah, she her decision to Jennifer assisted accompanied by an from the Portland eased her labor water, this time bathtub, and was at home, she

Elijah in the water. This was not an option with her firstborn as there are rules against delivering in water at the hospital. Having the freedom to remain in the water was a blessing, as she remembers having to get out of the tub as one of the hardest things about her delivery at the hospital.

Katie tears up talking about her midwife, "one of most beautiful things about our experience with Eli was the home prenatal care." She goes on to say, "Gus (August) could be at the appointments, and it was much more about something that was happening to our whole family instead of a medical thing that I was going through." She describes her homebirth experience as "peaceful." Her son, August, spent the night at his grandparent's house the night she went into labor. He went to preschool the next day and came home that afternoon to his Mama at home with his new baby brother; just another day for him.



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### Midwives in Clatsop County

Midwives commonly assisted in the delivery of babies in the past. Those who were registered to act as midwives in the years from 1915 to 1921 included:

Sophia Thompson - 225-29th Astoria  
Tilda Larsen - 2-43rd St. Astoria  
Elizabeth Carlson - 68 Columbia Astoria  
Anna Kempainen - 261 Alameda Astoria  
Martha Worum - 23 First St. Astoria  
Nora Lind - 408 35th St. Astoria  
Hilda Andras - 388 Alameda Astoria  
Emma Joki - 139 Columbia Astoria  
B.C. Isaacson - 68 Columbia Astoria  
Ida Odell - 5 Columbia Astoria  
Tina Nikkila - Astoria  
Marie Marelle - Clifton



they eat, how and where they choose to educate their children, or the ways in which they utilize (or don't utilize) conven-



### North Coast Midwifery Resources:

™ Jennifer Childress, Certified Professional Midwife  
(503)368-5886  
Email: midwife@nehalem.tel.net

™ Patricia Boullie, Certified Nurse Midwife  
Columbia Memorial Hospital, Women's Center  
Astoria, Oregon  
(503)338-7595

™ Cynthia Luxford, Certified Professional Midwife  
Home Sweet Home Birth  
Otis, Oregon  
(541)996-3968  
homesweethomebirth.com

™ Oregon Midwifery Council  
oregonmidwiferycouncil.org

tional western medicine; they've begun to carve their own path.

Jennifer looks forward to her future, and she smiles at the thought of aging. She knows that in her line of work, she will only get more experienced with age, and that excites her. Be it in her garden, her barn, her own home, or the home of a laboring mother, her daily practices of trust, nurture, and hope make her the strong and peaceful midwife that she is. Her love for all that is alive radiates into her everyday life, touching those who know her; whether she's assisted us in labor or not.

## Clatsop County Women A Little History By Lissa Penner

**YOU CAN** learn a lot about women in Clatsop County's history by reading through the books at the Heritage Museum's Archives. Did you know that there were about twice as many men as women here in the years from 1850 to 1870 and that on the 1850 and 1860 censuses together only one woman was listed with an occupation -- although most of the men were? She was Helen Lattie and her occupation was that of a servant. By 1870, there were plenty of occupations listed for women. The most common was servant. Several women ran hotels or boarding houses. There were also dress makers, teachers, a confectioner, a laundress, and a dairy maid. Much changed in the 1870s. Suddenly there were women cannery workers and dance houses with prostitutes.

The lives of local women in our history can be tracked by the census records, land records, hotel registers, police records, court cases, church records, city directories and much more. Although there were women around, they were seldom mentioned in the early newspapers. One rare comment from the 1870s is a bit of masculine humor printed about a hunting trip in which the men "took along their wives and other cooking utensils."

A small number of the pioneer women were able to improve their status in life. The 1850 census lists William H. Gray as a farmer but for a time he kept a boarding house on the waterfront on 8th Street in Astoria. P.W. Gillette wrote in his journal on December 22, 1962: "I took dinner with Mrs. Kamm, the wife of the wealthiest man in Portland. She used to reside in Astoria and when her mother kept boarding house, had to work very hard. She done my washing for several years; for all of which she was none the worse. But now she keeps a servant and does not even do her own cookery. How vary sudenly and strangely we sometimes change circumstances!"

Mary Christina Boelling Flavel's father Conrad Boelling had a boarding house in Astoria on 9th Street near the waterfront. No doubt she and her sisters had to work hard there until she married Captain George Flavel. On January 1, 1863, Gillette described a party he attended at "Madonie Flavell's" at whose house he "found assembled the youth and beauty of the town or a part of it. We played 'Magic Music' 'Hunt the Key' etc. and made ourselves rediculous, generally."

We have tried to capture a lot of the stories of women in issues of Cumtux now printed by the Clatsop County Historical Society for some thirty-two years. One story in process is that of the women who took out land claims in their own names. The only woman who proved up on a donation land claim in Clatsop County was Elizabeth Lattie whose Indian name was Sikkus. Her claim included what is a large part of Seaside today. Mary Christina Flavel's grandmother had settled on a claim on Youngs River, but abandoned it before proving up on it. Those claims were in the 1840s and 1850s. A large number of women took out land claims when the homestead act took effect in 1862. The mystery is what impelled them to settle on some of the distant valleys and hills of Clatsop County. We're looking for those stories now.