

## A Young Father Takes Part in the Miracle of Birth

As Yuri and Lena prepared for the birth of their first child, the young couple began contemplating the idea of being together for this happiest of moments. “We made this baby together and we both wanted to be there when he came into the world,” Yuri says, looking proudly down at 11-month-old Daniel playing contentedly nearby. Agreeing with her husband, Lena notes, “We both decided early on that we wanted to do this together . . . We thought it would help us build a strong foundation for our family.”



Yuri and Lena—with Daniel—say being together for the birth of their son will always be one of their most precious and unforgettable memories.

But as the couple began their search for a maternity house that would accommodate their wish, Yuri and Lena discovered that it was not as easy as they had hoped. “We went to a number of facilities in Kiev, but the doctors all tried to discourage us, saying that the delivery room was no place for a man, maybe he would faint at the moment of birth, or spread some sort of infection to the mother and newborn, or maybe by seeing how much women suffer during birth, he would not want to have other children,” Lena explains, counting off the laundry list of explanations she and Yuri were given about why their decision was not a wise one.

Doctors were not the only ones who questioned the couple’s decision; friends and family also tried to dissuade them. “As we were trying to make our decision, we spoke to a number of people—parents, friends, and other family members—and obtained as much information as we could. I even wrote to a friend in the United States who told me that it was common practice there for fathers not only to be present during the birth, but also to play an active role in the delivery,” Yuri explains. But that was one of the few positive and encouraging responses they received, Lena says. “While we found some maternity houses that do allow husbands to be present, none of them would allow the fathers to take part in the process. Everyone was against it at first, even our parents, but I believed that there was no good reason why Yuri should not be able to participate in the greatest and finest moment of our lives—the birth of our child.”

So Yuri and Lena continued their search until someone suggested they try the Kiev WWC. It was there that they learned about the School for Young Parents, a series of classes that helps prepare couples for family births. “This was our first child so, really, the courses proved to be our introduction to the entire process,” Lena admits, saying both she and Yuri were eager to learn as much as they could. Yuri agrees, noting, “After seeing videos of live births, I have to say that it was not at all what I expected, but that didn’t cause either of us to change our minds about being together for the birth. In fact, the classes were a key factor in our final decision—they provided important psychological preparation and practical instruction.”

That preparation and instruction proved useful during the delivery, according to Lena. “Having Yuri with me made me feel very comfortable. It was easier for me to deal with the pain because I was able to draw on his physical and emotional support.” Explaining that the birth felt like a team effort, Yuri laughingly concurs. “I kept remembering that some of the other doctors said I might faint during the birth, but I didn’t have time to faint because I was completely involved in the process,” he

“Partners in Birth,” a program offered by many AIHA Women’s Wellness Centers (WWCs), prepares couples for pregnancy and parenthood by providing information on topics such as proper prenatal and post-partum nutrition and exercise, pain management during labor through relaxation and measured breathing, breastfeeding, and infant care. One of the important aspects of Partners in Birth is that it encourages partners—fathers, family members, or friends—to take an active role during birth, a concept that is still foreign in the NIS and CEE. The program seeks to create a positive psychological and emotional climate among prospective parents and staff in maternity hospitals. Another goal is to make the pregnancy, labor, and delivery as pleasant and free from stress and uncertainty as possible by increasing patient knowledge. This is the story of one couple’s experience surrounding the birth of their first child; the story of the midwife who helped prepare them appears on the other side.

states. He was even the first person to hold Daniel after the delivery, according to Lena.

“During the course of our lives, we experience so many feelings and emotions, but nothing can compare to this,” Yuri concludes. “I believe that it was very important for me to be present during Daniel’s delivery to support my wife and to be there when he entered this world. For me, these moments were unforgettable and only serve to strengthen our love and our family.”

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## Making Pregnancy and Childbirth a Family Affair

When Larisa Cheprasova first witnessed prenatal classes for prospective parents, visited birthing rooms, and viewed deliveries at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, she immediately began conceiving the possibility of implementing such a program back home. A midwife at Kiev's Maternity Hospital #6 for 10 years, the 31-year-old Cheprasova was introduced to the concept of family births—when fathers learn how to support and assist their partners throughout pregnancy and to take an active role during labor and delivery—during an AIHA partnership exchange in 1993.



PHOTO: KATHRYN UTMAN

Larisa Cheprasova, a midwife at Kiev Maternity Hospital #6, teaches a class at the Kiev WWC's "School for Young Parents," which prepares couples for family births.

"I'm a very curious person and this was such a new and interesting idea," Cheprasova states. "I knew nothing like this existed in Ukraine and, without delay, I began asking questions of the staff at the hospital in Philadelphia. I also started gathering as much information as possible to educate myself and help me determine how the program could be adapted to the situation and mentality in Kiev."

Armed with what she had learned and the belief that such a program could make an important contribution to the well-being

of mothers and infants alike, Cheprasova broached the idea with her colleagues at the Maternity Hospital, using the literature and videos she collected to support her suggestion. "At first, I thought the medical staff would oppose the program—after all, it was so radically different from what we were used to and practically unheard of in the former Soviet Union. So I prepared myself for total rejection," she admits. But her pessimism proved unfounded and the project was approved.

After several months of preparation and training, including a visit to AIHA partnership facilities in Moscow where similar programs were already established, the Kiev WWC's "School for Young Parents" accepted its first students in December 1994. "That first year went smoothly and, after a few of the fathers participated in the birthing process by acting as labor and delivery coaches, even the people who were initially against the program came to see that it was effective," she says, noting that impressive successes such as a 13 percent decrease in perinatal mortality between 1994 and 1995 underscored its value.

The school offers three two-hour classes a week, either eight sessions for women in their first and second trimesters or four sessions for those in their third trimester. Each group consists of 15 people on average—usually couples, but sometimes women who come alone or are accompanied by family or friends—and is taught by Cheprasova.

"These courses are important for women regardless of whether or not their husbands choose to take part in the actual birth," she explains. "The women who have attended the classes say that it is much easier to give birth after training . . . because they do not experience the fear that comes from going through delivery alone. The presence of a husband or loved one enhances a woman's belief in her own ability, and the coach helps her follow the instructions of the midwife or obstetrician."

Seeing her idea through and knowing that she plays an important role for so many young women and men has made a real difference in how she views her profession, Cheprasova says. "I've noticed a big

The birth of a child is often one of the most momentous occasions life has to offer. Sharing the joys of the event—and having a supportive partner to help ease any pain and stress—can mean the difference between a positive experience and a frightening, lonely ordeal. AIHA partnership Women's Wellness Centers (WWCs) are striving to ensure that pregnancy and birth are safe, uplifting experiences by offering "Partners in Birth," a program that is bringing the concept of family birth to maternity hospitals throughout the NIS and CEE. At the Kiev WWC, for example, more than 1,800 couples have participated in prenatal classes at the Center's "School for Young Parents." This is the story of the midwife who helped develop and implement the program; the story of one couple who attended her classes and shared in the birth of their first child is on the other side.

difference over the past seven years . . . patients who are well-informed, comfortable, and confident generally have an easier time during labor and delivery. This makes our work more calm and relaxed . . . even the children are better served because the deliveries are quicker." But her greatest professional achievement, she notes, came when one of the physicians who was a vociferous opponent of the program recommended that some of his friends attend the classes. "Witnessing firsthand the joy the parents experienced being together at the time of birth convinced him that it was worthwhile and this show of support and acceptance from someone who so strongly opposed the idea is the second-best validation I could ever receive." The first, she says with a smile, is watching couples she has trained work together to bring their children into the world.

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