

ADVOCATING FOR MATERNAL HEALTH: A LOOK AT THE 2019 MARCH FOR MOMS EVENTS

With Nicole Heidbreder, RN, CD(DONA), BDT(DONA)
and Stacey Smith, CD(DONA), LCCE

Photos by Sally Morrow and attendees



2019 marks the third year that March for Moms has held important advocacy events in Washington, D.C. This year, May 10 was Advocacy Hill Day, and May 11 was the March for Moms Rally. DONA International is a partner of March for Moms and, along with many other childbirth-related organizations, our members proudly participated in these events to raise awareness and advocate for the critical need of all families to be adequately supported during pregnancy, birth and parenting. This means access to good care, fair treatment and reasonable leave from work.

International Doula spoke with doulas Stacey Smith and Nicole Heidbreder about their experience at these events.

International Doula: Why did you attend these March for Moms events?

Nicole Heidbreder: As a Labor and Delivery Nurse and a Birth Doula Trainer in Washington, D.C., there was no doubt in my mind why I would join the March for Moms activities. Washington, D.C., is my home and where I work, but it also happens to be one of the cities in

the midst of a maternity health care crisis. According to America's Health Ranking's 2018 analysis of CDC data, about 36 women die for every 100,000 live births in D.C., compared to 20.7 deaths nationally. Those women most at risk in D.C. are minority women. Those statistics will only change when we advocate for birthing people outside of the birthing room as strongly, if not stronger, than we do inside it. The two bills before Congress, HR.1897 and S.116, are a right step toward changing the system to provide better care. I felt proud to speak with congressional representatives, requesting their support by signing these two bills.

Stacey Smith: I am saddened that our country trails other developed nations when it comes to maternal deaths, especially when many of those deaths could be prevented. I am also deeply concerned that women of color, no matter their socioeconomic status, are more likely to die in childbirth. I attended the March for Moms because I wanted to support efforts to examine and find solutions to these problems. I also attended because I see doulas as a vital part of the solution.

ID: How did it feel being a DONA International doula at these events?

NH: I'm always so proud to be a DONA International member at any event, and it's a balm for me to connect with other board members. Seeing Ravae (Sinclair), Melissa (Harley), Ana Paula (Markel) and Nikia (Lawson) was like a little slice of heaven. For three years, I served as



Left to right: Casey Runck, Stacey Smith, Jennifer Finnegan, Elizabeth Parish, Sarah Paksima, Rena Geibel

the director for International Development for DONA International, and it's one of the things I am most proud of in my life. What I remember most is the dedication the other board members gave to the organization and to the doula profession.

ID: What was your biggest takeaway?

NH: Listening to Randy Munayyer Stephan talk about being a postpartum near-miss event survivor. The description of her story and the long-term impact had me in tears.


SS: I was encouraged to see people from varied backgrounds gathered together for a common cause. There were politicians, policymakers, family members of women who had tragically passed away, concerned citizens and birth workers, including doctors, midwives, nurses and doulas. The problems of maternal health are large and complicated, and fixing them will take many people putting their minds and hearts into the work.


ID: What meaningful connections did you make?

NH: Beyond reconnecting with old friends, listening to and then meeting Monica McLemore was just beyond special. I love what she is doing and what she is saying!

SS: Many members of my doula family were in attendance, and it's always great to strengthen the connection with women who have been influential in helping me understand the power of a good doula and

how to be one. This event was also special for me because I brought my husband, son and two daughters so that they could hear the stories and ideas that were shared. 🌸





Nicole Heidbreder works as a Labor & Delivery and Hospice nurse in the Washington, D.C., area and has been attending births as a doula for over 15 years in D.C., New York City, San Francisco, Sumatra, Bali and Uganda. She also facilitates independent birth doula workshops and trains nursing students as a clinical instructor with the Johns Hopkins University Birth Companions Program.

Stacey Smith is a birth doula and childbirth educator, with a degree in Biology Composite Teaching. Before transitioning into birth work, Stacey worked as a middle school science teacher.

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