

Description

When a pandemic looked like it might derail the plans of the new Midwifery Ambassadors – who are tasked with positively transforming perceptions of the profession – a new idea was born to coincide with International Day of the Midwife. A virtual choir of more than 30 midwives from across the country worked to create a video recording of “Somewhere over the Rainbow”. It’s a video that has been widely shared and brought comfort to many, while also challenging the Ambassadors themselves to step outside their comfort zones – and think about innovative ways they can reach out to new audiences.

A virtual hug

On International Day of the Midwife 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, NHS Midwifery Ambassadors shared a song. The specially adapted rendition of “Somewhere over the Rainbow” sung by 32 midwives from across England, aimed to spread some hope and happiness at a time when everyone’s lives – particularly those of pregnant women and new families – have been disrupted and changed beyond recognition:

> “Someday we’ll wish upon a star, and wake up where this time is far behind us. Where mothers birth and babies born, And life will be a time to share for all, always.”

But this was a song with a difference. It wasn’t just the words that changed to suit the moment. For one thing, it was sung by a virtual choir whose members never met or rehearsed together but who sang alone in their bedrooms and kitchens up and down the country with a backing track playing in their ear, family members eavesdropping at the door . And far from being months in the planning, ed in just a few weeks.



The final video, initially shared in a tweet

sent out by England's Chief Midwifery Officer, Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, had within days gone viral;

> The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge's official twitter account retweeted it. As of July, the YouTube video has had more than 10,000 views.

So how did it all come about?

The Midwifery Ambassadors are nominated from every maternity service across England with the aim and purpose of championing midwifery. It is their role to positively transform the perception of the profession in three main areas: the future workforce, the current workforce and the public and media. Transforming Perceptions of Midwifery is one of three key ambitions set out by Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent.

Since October 2019 the Ambassadors have been tasked with reaching out to different groups – visiting schools and colleges, engaging in wellbeing-focused activities in the workplace and linking with the media and the general public to spread positive messages, morale and inspiration. The aim is to enhance the perception of midwifery as a profession to be proud of; one that is trusted, valued and respected, one that children and young people aspire to join, one that our colleagues want to remain in.

Coronavirus looked like it would derail much of the work that was planned. As the virus took hold, maternity units up and down the country were faced with unprecedented challenges of their own and the Ambassadors got on with their "day jobs", cancelling promotional events.

Finding solace

However, many of them still found time for a weekly Zoom call, where they could share what was happening at their own unit. Despite the fact most of the Ambassadors have never met each other in real life, they found solace in a virtual catch-up as Benash Nazmeen, Midwifery Ambassador (MA) for Bolton, explains:

> "When the pandemic hit the tension was palpable. These strangers soon became friends who we shared our concerns and worries with, friends who we didn't know but still supported through the uncertainty of navigating the upheaval of Covid-19. We needed a support session for one another and when this was set up, I lead a group meditation and a sing-along. We realised on reflection that the singing was uplifting."

An idea was quickly born – over a stream of WhatsApp messages – to create a virtual ambassador choir and record a song for International Day of the Midwife. Within days, a song was chosen, and lyrics were rewritten. Jillian Ireland, MA for Poole, worked on recruiting and organising the choir before professional musician Simon Austin (son of Denise Austin, MA for Derby and Burton) offered his services. He produced and edited the video, combining all the voices to ensure the project's success.

Most of the Ambassadors had never sung in a choir before, let alone recorded themselves singing solo. But the final video surpassed their expectations and, as Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent put it, *"acknowledges the challenge of today whilst celebrating, demonstrating, mobilising and uniting for tomorrow."* (In fact, it's been so well-received that plans are already afoot to record another song aimed at encouraging pregnant women to access care).

Below, some of them explain the challenges and rewards of creating the unique project in record time:

"Together we all stood shoulder to shoulder even though miles apart. It really shows how much you can feel collective support from afar and how much strength it can give you to step way outside your comfort zone when you feel part of something bigger than yourself. That epitomises working as a midwife in the NHS for me".
Sarah-Jane Pedlar, MA, Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust

"By the time recording deadline was looming, Ramadan had arrived, I was conscious of long fasts and no drink so in the end I sent in my second take, full of errors and mistakes but completely committed to uniting with the ambassadors to put some positivity out there into the midwifery community. I learnt to not delve on my insecurities and that in the Midwifery Ambassador's network I had gained a supportive cheerleading squad that I didn't know I needed".
Benash Nazmeen, MA, Bolton NHS Foundation Trust

"Shielding at home, I have watched from afar the changing world of midwifery as my colleagues bravely adapted their care to support families from new risks. Joining the choir for this song was a challenge as it was outside of my comfort

zone. I achieved it by focusing that this was a chance to show my colleagues support and bring a smile whilst isolated at home". Claire Podmore, Tameside & Glossop NHS Foundation Trust

"I love to sing and, having set up a workplace choir in 2012 I know how nerve-wracking it can be for people and how good a blend of voices can sound when it's done with heart. We were being both challenged and mutually supportive". Jillian Ireland, MA for Poole

I hate joining in, it is so not my thing, but I love Midwifery, and that really is my thing. In my career-wide endeavour to feel the fear and do it anyway I did join in. It's like when you're not feeling it on shift, and you just have to bring your game face, because some things are more important than your own comfort zone, so I said yes to being in the Choir".
Mair Davies, MA for Royal Devon & Exeter

"To me it felt like a warm blanket across the country!"
Kate Stringer, MA for Surrey & Sussex Healthcare Trust

"I am more of a closet singer unless I am singing along with 50,00 football fans, so when the idea of a MA choir was discussed I had to give it a go. What I didn't realise was how enthralling it would be". Louise Walker, MA for University of Nottingham

"I now have a lovely group of friends who I still don't know".
Denise Austin, MA, Derby and Burton

"My children thought it was hilarious me dressing up in my wig and singing my heart out on a Sunday afternoon with my earphones in and phone propped on a painting easel! It made me feel so uplifted and cemented strong ties with the midwifery ambassador group".
Tracy Hoggarth, MA for Leeds Teaching Hospital Trust

"I was so proud when I saw my face amongst a sea of incredible midwifery role-models. I love having this video to treasure my final months as a student and feeling so much more confidence to dive into opportunities such as these and have fun doing them!"
Abbie Rich, MA and 3rd year student, University of Plymouth

"I felt the virtual hug which was the sentiment in the song of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' on the day of release and so did many of my colleagues, which only proves that in these very difficult and unpredictable times anything is possible, we stand strong and together with women and with each other".
Michelle Knight, MA for Epsom and St Helier

"Although I probably have not sung since primary school I joined. On reflection the chance to participate gave me a nudge, it certainly reminds me of how as midwives we can make people feel during their pregnancy and birth".
Jo Daubeney, MA for Gloucestershire

"In true midwife spirit, grit and determination, we recognised our weakness, we took on the challenge, we talked, we listened, we supported each other, we encouraged, we motivated, we laughed, we shared, we inspired, we bolstered each other. If I can do it, so can you. One day, when we wake up with this time far behind us – I hope we can actually get to sing together for real".
Sarah Neal, MA for Rotherham

"As a senior midwifery system leader, I am very experienced at public speaking and am never phased by the audience as I am passionate about my profession and subject I may be presenting. But for me this was a whole different ball game, so far out of my comfort zone I almost pulled out. I am so proud of all the Midwifery Ambassadors across England and how they have pulled together to support each other during this difficult time both through the choir and beyond. I can honestly say I am proud to lead and support this amazing group and am now so pleased that I didn't pull out".
Claire Mathews, North West Regional Chief Midwife and National Transforming perceptions of Midwifery Lead, NHS England & NHS Improvement

You can watch the choir in action here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HM3H-1CH2yk&app=desktop



by Frances Rivers, MA for Kingston NHS Foundation Trust, with contributions from the Midwifery Ambassadors named above.

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