

Description

Eulogy: Penny Simkin, Mother of the Doula Movement

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she/her

Social: birthblissacademy

Penny Simkin was my hero, my mentor, and my great inspiration. From the moment I met her in June 2007, when I was honoured to serve as her chaperone during a couple of workshops she was facilitating here in the UK, she profoundly impacted my life. It was during the car ride from Hertfordshire to London that I asked Penny what her advice would be for someone like me who aspired to be like her. Penny suggested I should pursue a degree in psychology or sociology, continue my doula work and teaching, and perhaps write a book. This led me to embark on a degree, which I achieved the same year I turned 40. Later, in 2014, I published my first book, *The Secrets of Birth: What Every Woman Should Know about Birth and Motherhood.*

Revolutionising childbirth education and labour support

Penny was a beacon in the world of childbirth education. A physical therapist by training, from 1968 she devoted herself to revolutionising childbirth education and labour support. She prepared over 15,000 individuals and families for childbirth, transcending the role of an educator to become a trusted doula for hundreds of them during the most pivotal moments of their lives.

Her contributions extend through several influential books aimed at both parents and professionals, along with practical teaching materials and educational videos, like “There’s a Baby,” designed to prepare siblings for a new family member. The book *When Survivors Give Birth* is still a leading resource for survivors and caregivers alike. Penny also co-founded DONA (Doulas of North America) International and PATTCh (Prevention and Treatment of Traumatic Childbirth), reflecting her commitment to improving childbirth experiences for all involved, particularly in supporting survivors of childhood abuse and traumatic childbirth.

A life filled with love and happiness

As well as her professional accomplishments, Penny’s life was filled with love and happiness. With her husband, Peter, she cared deeply about her large and loving family, which included four grown children, nine grandchildren, numerous grandchildren-in-law, five great-grandchildren, and her beloved dog, Casey. Having a family was her greatest pride, and she treasured every moment spent with them.

> Penny showed us that despite being in the midst of adversity, the opportunity to create something hopeful and empowering is always there

I was honoured to invite Penny on a couple of occasions, in 2013 and 2016, to run her When Survivors Give Birth (WSGB) workshop, notably titled “From Trauma to Triumph”. This showcased Penny’s unique ability to address such a sensitive topic with hope, always focusing on solutions and empowerment. Penny taught us that we should not only feel the rightful anger at the injustices that had happened but should also use those emotions to channel them into positive actions to make a difference in women’s lives.

Penny showed us that despite being in the midst of adversity, the opportunity to create something hopeful and empowering is always there. This perspective is a beacon for so many of us, spreading light on the path towards healing and improving care for those who have already endured so much.

Shared smiles

There are so many lessons from Penny that have profoundly impacted me but by far the most powerful is the Caregiver’s Motto, which is something I aspire to daily. It says: *“This person has a very good reason for feeling this way, behaving this way, saying these things, and believing these things. I may be the target right now, but I am not the reason.”* When I was blessed to spend time with Penny, either during the workshops I organised, or having dinner together later, if we encountered someone whose behaviour was challenging, Penny would give me a knowing look, and I would recite: *“I may be the target…”* which often led to shared smiles.

I carry a card in my purse with these words that Penny gave me, and it is a daily reminder of her wisdom and compassion. This motto drives home the importance of maintaining perspective and a sense of humour when faced with adversity.

In 2014, I was incredibly proud to be invited to the Simkin Center in San Diego to join the Educator’s workshop to become a facilitator of the WSGB workshop. I have so many lovely memories of this trip, learning directly from Penny and Phyllis Klaus, the grandmothers of all doulas, and also spending time and making new friends with some lovely DONA doulas. This time is so special to me, and I feel truly blessed. It was during this trip that I spoke to Penny about how her Roadmap of Labor inspired me to create my own version, “The Path to Birth”. Penny was so supportive and very kindly gave me her blessing and I assured her that I would reference my work to her original illustration.

Despite her monumental achievements throughout her life, Penny remained remarkably humble, attributing successes to participants’ collective effort and resilience. She listened more than she spoke, and her approach to leadership was about pushing others forward, not seeking the spotlight for herself.

When I wrote my second book, *Supporting Survivors of Sexual Abuse Through Pregnancy and Childbirth: A Guide for Midwives, Doulas and Other Healthcare Professionals*, Penny was so supportive and contributed with a foreword to the book. In her very gentle way, she also pointed out that she had grave concerns about the spelling and grammatical errors in the unedited version I had forwarded to her. I was able to reassure her that this was not a final version, but I appreciated that she was making sure that my work would be of the highest quality, knowing that English is not my first language.

> Her impact on the world of doula work and childbirth education is immeasurable

Inspiring others

As I was walking down to my office last week, a log cabin at the bottom of my garden, memories of Penny flooded back, and I'd like to think she came to say goodbye. Her impact on the world of doula work and childbirth education is immeasurable, and her spirit of kindness, compassion, and humour will continue to inspire those of us who aspire to her greatness. Penny has been someone I have looked up to since my entry into the doula world back in 2002 and I will cherish the time we spent together dearly.

Although there will never be another Penny Simkin, as she was truly one in a million, I am committed to continuing her legacy of making pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period celebrations of life, empowerment, and healing. I especially want to continue her work educating birth professionals about supporting survivors of sexual abuse and previous trauma.

I extend my deepest condolences to Penny's family and all those who were touched by Penny's legendary presence and who saw her for what she truly was. May Penny rest in peace and may her memory continue to inspire and guide us for years to come.

In her memory, let us carry her torch with pride and continue her work with the same passion and dedication she exhibited throughout her life.

Goodbye, Penny. You were deeply loved and will forever be remembered. You are my inspiration and I aspire to your greatness.

Kicki

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