

Libby Dickson, CNM

Interviewed by
Kim Fleming, SNM
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Libby Dickson received her BSN from West Virginia University in 1964 and began working as a staff ICU nurse at Chapel Hill Memorial Hospital. Libby recalls with great clarity a moment from that first nursing job in which she realized that, being a BSN rather than diploma educated nurse, she needed help developing her skills on the unit. She found someone she trusted, and confided that she only knew how to read a metric thermometer. She speaks of great fondness for that LPN, for the help she received that day, and for the lasting friendship that grew out of that moment. It was a moment that clearly inspired one of her more important pieces of personal philosophy, and the best pieces of advice she had to give: “It’s better to ask for help than to pretend.” Echoed too in this sentiment, repeated often during our conversation, is the notion that not only should you not be afraid to ask for help, but that there is great value in knowing from whom to ask help, and when.

Though Libby knew right out of nursing school that she wanted to be a midwife, having been inspired by her OB instructor and a lecture about Mary Breckenridge, her life took her down many other paths first. She spent time as head nurse in a nursing home in Scotland, as staff and head nurse in newborn nurseries in Houston, TX and Chapel Hill, NC, and as a staff nurse in Greensboro, NC. During these years she also taught in obstetric and maternity nursing. In 1977 Libby received an MSN in Maternal-Child Nursing from UNC Greensboro; she spent the next three years continuing to teach undergraduate nursing courses at UNCG while also teaching childbirth education classes.

In 1980 it was finally time to pursue her dream of becoming a midwife. She submitted applications, but had been repeatedly told it would take three or four years to get accepted, so she told no one. Being wait-listed at MUSC in Charleston, SC was a fact that initially confirmed that she’d just need to reapply again the following year, and perhaps the year after that. She was undeterred, and determined. To her surprise, she received a call a few months later to offer her a seat in the post-master’s midwifery certificate program from the waitlist. Having told no one that she’d even applied, she found herself in a quandary. She already had students and clinicals assigned for the coming semester. Again, she realized that she needed to ask for help. She spoke with her dean at UNCG, was encouraged to go, and she did. She moved to Charleston for a year, and completed her Integration Module at the first birth center in North Carolina, a hospital based center in Siler City, NC. She was awarded her certificate in Midwifery in late 1981.

After returning to Greensboro from Charleston to be with her family, Libby set about the task of finding a job as a newly minted midwife. Initially, she expected this to be an easy task, anticipating that physicians would be happy to have her help. She quickly realized that she was to have no such luck. Time and again she was turned away. The OB community in Greensboro was uninterested in incorporating a midwife into their ranks. A friend suggested that she try the neighboring community of High Point. The thought of practicing in High Point had never occurred to her, and at the time it

seemed impossibly far away. Nonetheless, she was determined to begin practice as a midwife, so she began to arrange meetings. Again, she was met with stonewalling, and then everything changed.

She was waiting for an interview when the doctor came out, greeted her warmly, and apologized, telling her that he was about half an hour behind, but would be with her shortly. This was a night-and-day difference from how she'd been treated by the other doctors whom she'd approached. In their conversation he explained that he'd worked with midwives in California, and would be happy to have her as part of his team. He told her that he was planning to open a birth center, and he gave the project over to her. From meeting with the architects to developing daily operations, the birth center truly became her own. Libby speaks affectionately of her relationship with this doctor, and the true partnership they had. She jokes about the "dog and pony" show they would play with doctors who were skeptical of the birth center and of midwives. He was truly an ally of both Libby and midwifery. In 1982 they opened the first freestanding birth center in the state, the Carolina Birth Center in High Point, NC; the first birth at the center was in 1983.

During this time midwifery was being hotly contested at the state level. Libby was active in lobbying for legislation that would allow midwives to continue to practice once the current law had sunset. When the Midwifery Joint Committee was established, she was appointed as one of two midwives to hold a seat; she served in the role from 1983-1995. Her years on the Midwifery Joint Committee were often frustrating, and the experience with the physicians on the board was often adversarial. Nonetheless, she remains proud of what they were able to accomplish, and the manner in which it helped to expand midwifery services for women in North Carolina.

Libby retired from birthing on 9/9/1999 and as the director of Carolina Birth Center in 2002. She speaks with great joy and passion of her years as a midwife. She reiterates again and again the importance of finding allies and asking for help, of hard work, and of recognizing serendipity when it's staring you in the face. She looks back on her time as a midwife fondly remembering all the babies she helped into the world, but the moments she relishes the most are those in which she was with women as they found their own power.

Reflection

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Meeting with Libby Dickson was a humbling and inspiring experience for me. As a student midwife in this era, it's easy to get bogged down in how unfriendly the obstetrical community often still is for our profession. It's easy to feel as though there are few places where my practice will be welcomed. It's all too often easy to let this feel demoralizing, especially while also trying to slog through real life, school, and work. Talking with Libby served as an amazing counterpoint, reminding me of just how far we have come as a profession, but also how far we still have to go. Libby fought hard to ensure the rights of midwives to practice in North Carolina, but we still don't have autonomy of practice.

I'm so grateful for the contributions of women like Libby, who fought long and hard for midwives and women; through her story, I feel newly inspired to keep fighting the good fight, and to stand up to be a force for positive change. Hearing Libby reflect on her life as a midwife with so much consideration and passion has helped to reignite in me the passion I felt when I was first applying to midwifery programs. Being a graduate student often feels like an endless process, but Libby has helped me to refocus on my end-goal: to be with women, and to help them find their power.