

## A Quarter Century of Catching Babies



## with Heather Reynolds

**THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 10TH, 1996 WAS A DEFINING TIME** for Kaisha Ortiz. It was on this day that she gave birth to her first child, her daughter Samari. For the Ortiz family this date had added meaning: October 10th was also the birthday of Kaisha's mother who had recently passed away. "Your grandma is with you on this special day, and that makes you very special too," whispered nurse-midwife Heather Reynolds to Samari as Kaisha held the newborn in her arms.

For Heather too, the day held special meaning. She had cared for Kaisha's mom, sister and grandmother, and as a result had become, in Kaisha's words, "a part of the family." Later, Heather provided nurse-midwifery services to Kaisha while she was pregnant with Samari's brothers, Willi and Gabriel.

As the two women drank coffee at Kaisha's house in June of 2005, they reflected on their decade-long friendship. They marveled at the three lives that Kaisha brought into the world, discussed the fourth that was "en route," and talked of the many ways in which Kaisha's life changed as a result, "more than I ever imagined," admitted Kaisha. The trust that had developed between the two women was evident in the easy-going manner in which they sat side by side, sipped coffee and spoke of the past and the future without breaking stride.

"Not only does developing a trusting, respectful relationship with patients make my work more meaningful, it also helps to ensure better health outcomes," explains Heather. "When you develop

a rapport with a patient and begin to appreciate the nuances of her life, it becomes so much easier to put her health needs in context. This is especially true when caring for women from underserved communities, many of whom have a distrust of the health care system.”

For most of her career, Heather has worked in communities that are underserved, “where health problems are prevalent to a very high degree,” she says. An associate professor of nursing at YSN, Heather is also a distinguished advocate for patients’ rights. She traces this aspect of her career to her early clinical experience, explaining, “Working with migrants when I first got out of school and indigent people in the south who had very poor health outcomes, really inspired me to become an advocate for the underserved.”

She currently serves as a Nurse Consultant in the Health Resources and Services Administration, Division of Nursing. There she speaks with the wisdom gained from her role as a nurse-midwife caring for two generations of young women having their babies at Yale-New Haven Hospital. She also serves as an Ambassador in The National Health Service Corporation and is a member of the City of New Haven’s Perinatal Partnership Program.

It is through public health work that Heather says she has been able to more fully understand and act on the issues that impact the lives of the people of New Haven. She says, “I hope that I am providing public policy leaders with a model of how to interact with families that is respectful and values what they bring to the relationships. I am particularly concerned that there not be this powerful ‘I know what you need’ approach to the community.”

She continues, “I think outreach to the underserved community should instead come from the perspective of giving them information and having them inform me how to best meet their needs. I want to be sure I am appreciating where they’re coming from.”

Heather sees a connection between providing for individual patient needs and training the next generation of advance practice nurses, saying, “For me, the two are very easily wedded —appreciating the dynamics of the population here in New Haven and teaching what I know about this community to those who would serve it.” She goes on to explain: “I realized, because patient advocacy is an issue that’s very near and dear to my heart, that I needed to cultivate a group of students—future health care providers—who would be sensitized to the needs

of that community and would be prepared to provide services that would be culturally competent.”

Heather’s dedication to the various aspects of her work is evident the moment one walks into her office at YSN. Her desk is piled high with reports, correspondence, her writings and those of her colleagues and students. Her bookshelves are lined with tomes on nurse-midwifery, psychology, social work and health care policy. Her walls are adorned with photographs of smiling families and their newborns; “My extended family,” she explains. Chances are high that when one knocks on Heather’s door they would find her working on more than one project at once, often a lot more. Yet, her door is always open, and this, according to Heather, is vital to her being an effective clinician and student mentor. “The ultimate goal of my work is to provide students and patients with the knowledge they will need to make smart, independent choices that positively impact their lives and the lives of those around them,” she says, “but I am also there for them when they need me.”

“Heather doesn’t just take treat you as a patient, she cares for you as a person,” says Kaisha Ortiz. With a fourth child on the way, Kaisha is no longer as nervous as she was in 1996 when she was pregnant with Samari. “Heather and I have been down this road before,” she says. “I am really lucky to have had her along for the ride.”

In October of 2005, as the Ortiz family celebrates Samari’s 9th birthday, Heather and her classmates will celebrate the 25-year reunion of their graduation from YSN. In the course of her career, Heather has cared for more than 2000 women and has delivered more than 600 babies. Looking back on her work over the past quarter century, Heather says, “Every experience has been unique. The women I have cared for and the students I have mentored have offered me an opportunity to learn more about my work, about myself and about life.”

“I teach my students that nurse-midwifery is hard work,” she says. “You have to be smart, patient, flexible, and perseverant. But most of all, you have to do it with love.”



Kaisha Ortiz at home with son Willi and daughter Samari.