



LIFTS

Linking Infants & Families to Supports

SIXTH ANNUAL MAGAZINE

BRINGING AVA HOME

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YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND IN ME

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CREATING SPACE TO CELEBRATE

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A publication of HMHB



Healthy Mothers,
Healthy Babies
The Montana Coalition





LINKING INFANTS & FAMILIES TO SUPPORTS

LIFTS is a statewide initiative from **Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies - The Montana Coalition**, connecting Montana families with the resources they need in order to thrive.

The **LIFTS online resource guide** offers an updated list of services across the state, searchable by location and type.

On the **LIFTS podcast**, we have meaningful conversations with Montana families, care providers, and advocates.

And in the **LIFTS magazine**, we share stories from Montana families of when getting help helps!

Whether you're seeking behavioral health support, breastfeeding guidance, child development resources, or connection to other community resources, let LIFTS be your trusted guide.

**Because no one should
navigate parenthood alone.**



Call the **anonymous warmline**
at **406-430-9100**
for help finding resources.



Photo provided by Chelsie Wilson



A heartfelt thank you to the incredible parents and families who shared their stories with us this year.

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WELCOME

Dear Readers,

In 2026, we're taking a beat to reflect on the purpose of the powerful stories we've been honored to hold in these pages.

By highlighting both the joys and challenges of parenting and caregiving from pregnancy through age three, these stories remind us that this is not a journey to navigate alone. Our goal as we lay out each paragraph and photo is for these personal narratives to reflect our acronym: Linking Infants and Families To Supports.

At Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies – the Montana Coalition, we hope the sixth issue of LIFTS Magazine gives a snapshot of what that support looks like in urban, rural and Tribal communities across the state, while also inspiring action.

That could be a call to a provider in our LIFTS Resource Guide. It could be reaching out to a parent or family member you know is struggling. Or as we look ahead to the 70th Montana Legislative Session, this could be advocating for a resource that has allowed you and your family to thrive.

If you have any feedback or thoughts on our LIFTS Magazine, we invite you to complete our reader survey at hmhb-mt.org/surveys and enter to win a \$100 gift card. Are you interested in being a part of our storytelling mission? We'd love to hear from you. Email us at stories@hmhb-mt.org.



With care,

Stephanie Morton

Executive Director

*Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies
– The Montana Coalition*

ABOUT HMHB

HEALTHY MOTHERS, HEALTHY BABIES - THE MONTANA COALITION

OUR VISION

All babies in Montana will have a safe and healthy beginning.

OUR MISSION

Improve the health, safety, and well-being of Montana families by supporting mothers and babies, age zero to three.

WHAT WE DO

HMHB brings people, resources, and ideas together to help create a better Montana for families.

CONNECT & CONVENE

We bring together partners, professionals and communities to share knowledge, strengthen systems and solve problems together.

LINK INFANTS AND FAMILIES TO SUPPORTS

Through LIFTS, we share trusted resources on topics that matter most to families and the people who support them.

AMPLIFY & ADVOCATE

We elevate family voices and champion policies and practices that support healthy pregnancies and strong starts for children.

BY THE NUMBERS

In partnership with public health departments, home visitors, clinicians, doulas and other family support providers, in 2025 we shared:



3450+

Resources in
the LIFTS
Resource
Guide



275

Free car
seats and
installation
training



203

No-cost
portable cribs
provided for
safe sleep



14,000

Magazines
distributed
annually

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LIFT OTHERS UP

Help ensure safe and healthy beginnings for Montana families.
Donate today at
hmhb-mt.org/donate.



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Photo by Morgan Ellis

SOURCES OF STRENGTH IN A NEW SEASON

BY BRITTNEY PLUMMER

I'm proud of who I am and what I've overcome in my life so far. If I start to feel any doubt, I just look at my children.

My daughter, Madison, age eight, is so powerful. She's a natural leader. My son, Nakoa, age six, has the brightest personality I've ever seen. He was diagnosed with non-verbal autism in 2023 and has come out of his shell so much. And my baby, Brady, is rambunctious, strong, and already walking.

Brady is also the reason I made the call to get help in 2024.

I started using meth in my early 20s. At the time it made me feel numb and helped me avoid traumatic experiences in my past. It was the only way to stop the negative thoughts and memories constantly racing through my head. I was 23 when I got pregnant with Madison and knowing I was going to be a mom was enough motivation at that point to stop. About a year after she was born, we moved to Wolf Point to start fresh. Despite setbacks, this worked really well for a while and I had the support I needed. I started a new relationship and soon found out I was pregnant with my son.

Nakoa was more than eight weeks early and was in the NICU for 26 days. He was a fighter from the start. "Nakoa" actually means "Warrior" and he was able to latch on and nurse at 36 gestational weeks.

After Nakoa got out of the hospital, we went home to Malta and I started working while my family looked after the kids. We found a routine. Everything seemed to be looking up and eventually I moved out of my sister's home. That was when I started using meth again.

I was able to maintain our life at first. But eventually, I was losing so much weight that I was a stick figure. It got to the point that I didn't want to go outside or leave the house. Finally, Child Protective Services (CPS) took custody of my two children. Shortly after, I found out I was pregnant. That's when a CPS caseworker from Miles City gave me a phone number for One Health and I called them.

Meeting recovery doula Lanita Hoskinson completely turned everything around. She made me see a brighter future, despite experiencing so much stigma and betrayal, even in my community. Lanita showed me that not everybody is out to get me. And, in fact, some people really want to help me recover.

Lanita had gone through exactly what I had gone through. "We're not here to make you look bad," she told me. "We're here to help you." Over time, I saw that Lanita stood behind that 100 percent. She always showed up for me. She was there for every court date. She never spoke badly about me. And Lanita was there when my son was born. I still have the little comb she gave me to celebrate Brady's arrival.

She was also part of the team who helped me find my inner toughness to continue through the 12-week contingency program to keep Brady and get Madison and Nakoa back. When I moved into my own apartment afterward, I had to pinch myself. I never thought I'd have a space like this to make our own.

The first night I had all my children there with me was a feeling I can't describe. I couldn't close my eyes. I just sat there watching them sleep and thought, "I did this. And I'm not going to do anything to lose what we have."

I still get tears of joy remembering the day my CPS case finally closed. I felt free, like we could start over.

Lanita also helped my mom who was going through what I was going through at the same time and had lost custody of my younger sister. I said, "Mom, we're going to do this together." I gave her Lanita's number and she got help. Now she has my sister back, too.

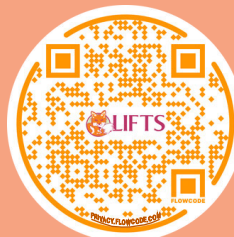
I'm so proud of our family and the work we've done to get here. Sometimes, when I get fearful or anxious, I touch this ring my mother gave me. My aunty gave it to her before passing away over 20 years ago, and I feel like it steadies me and gives me strength. It reminds me of the power I hold and the power of the women in my life who have gone before me and overcame so much. It reinforces that I can keep moving forward and know there are good things ahead. ●



Photo by Morgan Ellis



Photo by Morgan Ellis



Visit [hmhb-LIFTS.org](https://hmhb-lifts.org) and search for **"Doulas and Other Birth Professionals"** to find home visiting programs in your area. You can also browse the service types **"Lactation Support," "Housing,"** and **"Family Support and Education"** to find additional local resources.



BRINGING AVA HOME

BY CHLOE & SAM GILL



SAM:

Our family has been coming to our off-grid cabin west of Missoula for almost 50 years. I loved coming here as a child, and after I met Chloe, the cabin became part of both of our lives. Chloe was 26 weeks pregnant with our first baby when we returned as a family last August.

We settled into the cabin when Chloe started feeling increasingly uncomfortable with what she thought might be indigestion. Her symptoms worsened overnight, and to be safe, we thought we should find a clinic in Missoula. The next morning we were driving up Reserve Street and it was clear that we had a medical situation – but we weren't yet aware that this was a medical emergency.

We navigated to Community Medical Center, which houses the NICU unit and the Ronald McDonald House. Within a few minutes of coming through the doors, they assessed Chloe, ran initial blood pressure tests, and determined that this could be preeclampsia.

Even though the situation was intense and life-threatening, everyone was so calm, empathetic and professional. It helped us feel confident that, even though we were in a different place that was far from home, we were going to receive high-quality care.

CHLOE:

My first trimester was really smooth. But when I woke up that morning at the cabin, this felt different than indigestion. I said to Sam, "I just really don't feel well." The pain worsened during our drive into Missoula. By the time we arrived at Community, it was clear we made the right decision to go to a hospital.

I had HELLP Syndrome (Hemolysis, Elevated Liver enzymes and Low Platelets), which is a severe variant of preeclampsia. The only way to resolve HELLP is by delivering the baby and the placenta. Our doctor very gently told us that there was about an 80 percent chance that Ava would need to be delivered that day for my safety.

We were unprepared on so many levels. We packed for a vacation, not for parenthood. We arrived at the hospital in our cabin clothes. I work in healthcare, so I knew that having Ava at 26 weeks was significantly early and carried many risks.

SAM:

As a soon-to-be parent and the spouse of the person who is suffering from this condition, I worried for both the health of my wife and my baby. The few days we were in the hospital were tough. I remember the night our daughter was delivered; Chloe was so out of it, but suddenly she was very lucid, looked up at us and said, "It's time." She knew – call it mother's intuition – and the team quickly mobilized.

I give Chloe so much credit for listening to those instincts. Waiting even 30 more minutes would have led to a more dire emergency, as her placenta was in the process of detaching. The Community Medical team was so attentive and responsive to Chloe. She was in the driver's seat and they were there to amplify care and make sure that Chloe and Ava had the best outcome possible.





Photo provided by Gill Family

CHLOE:

Our daughter was born at 10:01 p.m. on August 15, 2025, weighing one pound and 12 ounces. She was just 11 inches long. As soon as she was delivered, I started feeling better. But there was still a lot of healing mentally and emotionally. And Ava's journey in the NICU was just beginning.

We were blessed with a strong network of support. Both sets of grandparents spent time with us, traveling to and from Minnesota to support our stay. In addition, it was the folks at the Ronald McDonald House - right across the parking lot from the NICU unit at Community - who became the most consistent support outside the hospital. They were so warm and welcoming from the moment we arrived. Having our basic needs met - shelter, food, emotional support - took such a weight off me as I was trying to heal and wrap my mind around being a mom in this very stressful and unplanned situation.

SAM:

Week-to-week, there were so many unknowns. What was so nice at the Ronald McDonald House is that they would share information on activities or offer outlets to take your mind off the uncertainty, even for an hour. It was also located next to a beautiful park, where Chloe and I could take a walk, look at the mountains, and escape from the intense pressure and stress of the NICU.

Despite everything, it was so magical getting to spend time with Ava each day. The NICU nurses gave us the opportunity to be very hands-on. They encouraged us to be as active and as present as we wanted to be.

I remember one day that was very hard. We were told that Ava's lungs were not resolving. Chloe was still at the NICU with her and I was sitting on a bench in a park. There was a woman, walking by with her little white dog and she stopped, looked at me, and said, "Are you okay?"

I normally do not open up to strangers but at that moment, I said, "I'm not. My daughter is doing very poorly in the NICU." And she stopped, sat, put her hand on my shoulder, said a little prayer, hugged me and said, "Know that you've got people praying for you." I never got her name, but that's exactly what I needed. In that moment, the kindness and hospitality of Montanans really shined.

CHLOE:

In September, Ava was on the highest level of ventilation that the NICU at Community could provide and she needed more. The Community Medical Center providers knew we had reached a critical point in Ava's journey and began the process to advocate for Ava to receive a higher level of care. This selfless act demonstrated how they really put Ava and her needs first. In a matter of a few days, transport was arranged to a hospital back in Minnesota. As soon as the details were set, we started to feel the weight of it. There were so many mixed emotions. We were going home. But Ava's team at Community and the staff at the Ronald McDonald House were the only world we had known in this crisis.



Photo provided by Gill Family

SAM:

We had become so close with the staff at the Ronald McDonald House and the providers surrounding Ava. They became our family. We trusted them with the care of our very fragile and delicate daughter. They were our touch point.

The Ronald McDonald House team actually offered to ship our car home. In the end, my dad drove back with me, while Chloe went with Ava – and they arranged to have snacks and an encouraging note waiting for me when my dad and I arrived at our hotel in Billings on our first night on the road home. It was all completely above and beyond.

CHLOE:

After we got home, Ava still had a long journey in the NICU. She had extremely fragile lungs and the outcome was still uncertain, but with the new ventilator she quickly started to make improvements. Eventually, after three more months, Ava was released from the NICU on Christmas Day. It was the best Christmas gift we could imagine, and it's all thanks to the amazing work of the NICU teams, both in Montana and Minnesota.

We're coming back to Missoula for the Ronald McDonald House 20th anniversary event in September. In a beautiful twist, this event also marks one year to the day since Ava was transferred from the NICU and we said goodbye to everyone who meant so much to us.

SAM:

I can't wait to introduce Ava to the Community Medical team, the Ronald McDonald House staff and to the family cabin. We've carved all of our names in the center pole in the middle of the cabin through three generations. We'll be carving Ava's name there too.

Looking back, Chloe and I learned so much about giving each other grace, while also leaning on each other for strength. We learned how to trust our gut as parents. And how to let other people in, so we could receive help – even if that was just a stranger praying for me on a park bench on a really tough day.

No one plans to go through what we went through. But I would tell other parents who are facing this journey: Don't be afraid to lean on other people. This is a time when you need so much support, and support is out there. ●



You never know what you'll need in parenting. **LIFTS** makes finding support easier, with resources at one website and help just a call away: **(406) 430-9100**.

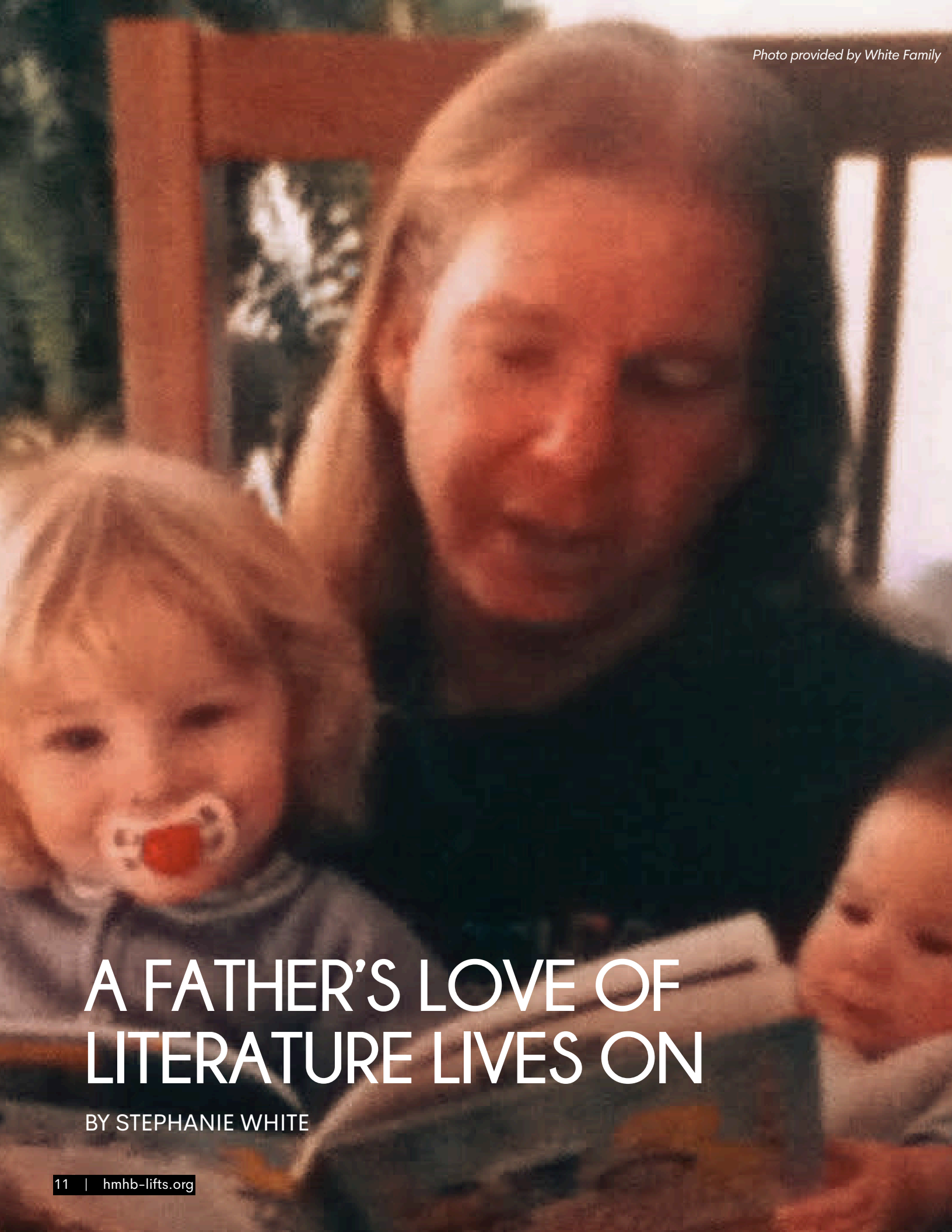


Photo provided by White Family

A FATHER'S LOVE OF LITERATURE LIVES ON

BY STEPHANIE WHITE

Growing up, my dad always read to me when he got home from work at the end of the day.

He was in construction at that time, but had been a journalist before I was born. I remember always being surrounded by literature and music. He was able to bring stories to life and showed me how exciting it could be to get lost in a good read. It was so special to watch him do the same animated voices and songs with our daughter, Norma, after she was born.

At the time, my husband Brandon and I lived in Denver. I worked the breakfast shift at a restaurant and was gone before anyone else was up. We lived within walking distance of our local library, and it was usually my dad who would walk there with Norma for story and music hours.

When Norma was three, we moved here to Philipsburg, Montana, where my husband's family had been based for many decades. I didn't know anyone when I got here and would come to the Philipsburg Library on my own with Norma. When I was pregnant with our second daughter, Retha, in the summer of 2022, a staff member asked, "Hey, are you in the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program?"

Dad made sure that reading and library programs were a big part of my childhood, and I wanted my girls to have the same experience. It wasn't until after Retha was born that I signed them both up for the Imagination Library program and they've been thrilled to get those books in the mail once a month through the years. This program connected us to similar resources we didn't know about before.

Our house is full of all kinds of books now. Some are from the Imagination Library and some are gifts and nostalgic books I kept from my early years. My mom had this really cute yellow bookshelf that I had growing up and when it was passed down to me, I filled it up with our favorites and put a little rocking chair in front of it. We were consistently grabbing books from it just to get Norma interested in reading, then Retha.

Now we have Judy, who just turned one. Reading is our "downtime" in the afternoons – we all need this imaginative space to relax. My husband also works construction and like my dad, he also loves to read to the girls when he gets home – which is usually what happens when I'm working a bartending shift.

By kindergarten, Norma was able to read really well. She was excelling so much that her teacher thought it might be a great opportunity for Norma to read to the preschoolers, which was a real confidence-booster.



She is eight now and constantly has her nose in a book. In May, she was the class winner for the local Bikes for Books program at her school, based on the number and variety of books she had read throughout the year.

The reading programs here have been a wonderful place to build our kids' literacy – but it's also created a community for my daughters and for me. Retha made her best friend at the Moms' Playgroup that my doula helped grow with a grant she applied for to keep moms in rural areas connected. Sometimes as many as 17 people come to the library on Tuesday mornings from all walks of motherhood and early childhood. Nobody's looking at anybody sideways here, and we know that we're all just trying to do our best as parents. There's a volunteer who reads to the kids, and the other parents can just talk about life and share projects that we're passionate about. Maybe that's a sourdough starter that we share, or seedlings from our gardens. The kids and I look forward to it every week.

I'm now the chairperson of the Philipsburg Library, and I want us to keep focusing on the needs of young families. That's only going to benefit the next generation by creating a safe place. I don't think kids, and sometimes moms and caregivers, always have that. So having these libraries and programs as that space – and maybe it's their only safe space – is a crucial asset to have in a rural area like ours. And it means that they will associate that feeling of warmth and learning with libraries and reading in years to come.

My dad passed away in April 2024, before Judy was born. I can still picture him reading Louis L'Amour in his favorite chair, his glasses on the tip of his nose, or writing in his journal while listening to worship music.

When I hear the girls singing and tapping into their imaginations with impromptu stories, I feel like his beautiful spirit and creativity is continuing on in them. ●



Visit [hmhb-LIFTS.org](https://hmhb-lifts.org) to find local libraries and child literacy resources by searching for "Public Libraries".

Enjoying LIFTS magazine?

Have these stories moved you, inspired you, or helped you find support or resources?

We'd love to hear what you think!

Take our short reader survey and share your feedback. You'll be entered in a drawing for a \$100 gift card.

Scan the QR code to take the survey.



Register Your child for

FREE BOOKS



Register your child in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and get a **FREE BOOK** in the mail every month until their 5th birthday.



Registration is quick and easy!



MontanaImaginationLibrary.org

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PROGRAMS



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YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND IN ME

BY EMILY PRESTON

My husband and I were both born and raised in Wisconsin, met at summer camp, got married at 20, and had never lived anywhere else until we moved to Montana. We didn't know a soul when we arrived in Missoula in 2020 so I could begin a graduate program.

We were 23, newly married and, of course, Covid had changed how everyone socialized that year. Neither of us had definitive jobs when we came to Montana and we had no friends. Looking back, it was a great experience for us to move outside our comfort zone, but at the time this was tough.

I was raised to believe that having a community is absolutely critical. This really hit home when I switched gears in my career and education and moved into clinic management, helping providers care for their patients. As we all moved through and beyond Covid, I witnessed first-hand how much support parents need at such a vulnerable time. I saw so much happiness, but I also saw the sleep deprivation, self-doubt, fear and the postpartum struggles when moms would come through the door of the clinic.

I think this inspired me to seek out my own support when I became a mom in 2025. I knew I needed this for my own mental health. I went to my first mom's group - Missoula Mom Walks - when our son, Colter, was six weeks old. Of course, there was a little bit of awkwardness and shyness at first as I met people for the first time. But then I started making connections with individual moms and meeting up for hikes or walks.

I also joined Missoula Mama's Circle and I've loved the coffee meetups and the mom support group that Katie Wilson puts on. There's always a topic that comes up that is relatable in our discussions. When I started looking around, there were quite a few resources and support groups for parents in the area. This has been a great starting point for friendships I've come to rely on in the last two years.

There are all these different stages we are walking through as first-time parents. We are processing all these "firsts" for our baby and ourselves, and there is pressure to have this look and feel a certain way. Having the right people as a sounding board is so important mentally. Those people can be there for you in the struggles, but also be there to reassure you that you're doing things right when you question yourself.

And it isn't just early infancy when I've needed other moms for support. This past winter was a hard season. There was snow everywhere and Colter wasn't fully walking, so it was isolating and hard to find activities that were indoors and fit him developmentally but didn't clash with nap times. So, even when those regular mom groups were hard to get to, I could still have impromptu meet-ups with friends I had made at the Mama's Circle, and talk things through.

I feel like we are in a new season now with Colter as he becomes a toddler. Life is overwhelming and joyful all at once. We still miss our families and friend circles back in Wisconsin. But having people I can count on here is still such a blessing. For instance, I had to take our dog to the vet for a last-minute emergency the other day, and Katie was able to watch Colter.

It's such an ordinary need. But knowing I have help around me when I'm stuck - and when I'm able, stepping in to help other moms - is invaluable in this life we are building as new parents. ●

Visit hmhb-LIFTS.org and search our LIFTS Resource Guide for "**Support Groups**" to find parent support groups in your area, as well as "**Play Spaces**" to get outside and meet other families.



Photo by Gwyneth Hyndman



Emily, left, with Katie and Katie's son Phoenix

BACK-TO-SCHOOL CHECKLIST for Montana Parents

- ☒ 1. Pack lunches
- ☒ 2. Sign permission slip
-  ☒ 3. *Protect vaccine laws*

Montana is the only state that doesn't report school immunization rates, leaving parents without information about outbreak risks.

Pro-vaccine parents like you can help change that. Join Montana Families for Vaccines to advocate for common-sense, nonpartisan policies that protect our children and communities from preventable disease.



MONTANA
FAMILIES FOR VACCINES

GET UPDATES





YOU ARE NOT ALONE

BY MAGGIE COOK

I was 16 when I found out I was pregnant with Milo. As soon as I saw that positive sign, my life changed forever.

At the time, I worked at CJ's Bar & Grill in Billings, had lots of friends, and was just getting into my party phase. I was with Milo's dad, but neither of us planned on having a baby. I actually never planned on having kids at all. I was going to be "the cool aunt" forever.

But the moment I saw the ultrasound images of Milo, I was in love with him. By the time I was seven weeks along, I was taking photos of my stomach in the mirror and then researching what was happening that week in the womb. I could feel his personality as he was growing in me - all the happiness, smarts, curiosity and energy he has now as a toddler.

I completely changed my life. I stopped partying and started staying away from the friends who I knew weren't good for me.

But as a teen mom, I didn't realize how lonely this transition would be. I couldn't talk to my friends about having a baby because they were all in high school and couldn't relate. My mom was still getting used to the fact that I was pregnant. I felt that since I was 16, I wasn't supposed to be excited about Milo's arrival.

I knew this was going to be difficult and I needed help. That's when I started looking for every single resource I could find.

Getting connected to my first home visiting nurse in those months made me feel like I could finally feel joy about having a baby. I was so relieved to be able to talk freely and ask questions. Our weekly appointments reassured me that it was okay to be excited. And that it was also okay to be scared.

And I could give myself permission to start planning for Milo.

I think I had a pretty great childhood. So, I wanted Milo to have what I had as a kid - the space and opportunity to explore and figure out who to be in the world. My first nurse helped me research how I wanted that to look. She helped me come up with a birth plan, connected me to mom groups, and helped me feel prepared for Milo's arrival.

And I think I looked pretty good for his arrival because I was doing a maternity photoshoot in the park with my sister when I went into labor at 39 weeks! She kept saying, "Just one more shot over here - you look so beautiful." I finally just looked at her and said, "We need to go to the hospital right now!"

I called Milo's dad, who was in school. He told his teachers and drove to the hospital. He and my mom were both there for the birth. Even though Milo was early, it went pretty much to plan. When they placed Milo on me, I just stared at him, crying, saying over and over, "You're so perfect."

My first big challenge was breastfeeding. I know that's common, but it was disheartening. It was very painful and I didn't know what to do because I had planned to breastfeed.

I couldn't even use a pump. I had milk in my body but couldn't actually get it to Milo because of the pain. I was ready to give up, but then a lactation consultant visited and helped me figure it out. I can't even describe the joy I felt when it stopped hurting. I was so proud and thankful. It's been wonderful to have that bonding and comfort time with Milo.

Then the next two years just unfolded.

Even though Milo's dad and I aren't together anymore, he is still part of Milo's life. The home visiting program I'm in has given me continued support through this time, as we've moved between Billings and Helena. I'm still so close to all the nurses who have played an important role in Milo's growth. Kate Sexton, Hannah Akard, Jayme Hernandez and Marisa Johnson have inspired my own growth as a mom as they've connected me to additional resources, like affordable housing and childcare, so I can plan for the future.

I've been able to go back to work as a barista and Milo and I just moved into our own place, thanks to housing vouchers. This means I don't have to worry about having enough money for rent. We also got Milo enrolled in the Best Beginnings childcare scholarship, and he loves going to the daycare. He's so attached to me, but it is great to see him interact with other kids and be social. Having housing and childcare also means that I can think about going back to school.

When I consider a career, I think about the people who were there for me in those important moments in my journey as a mom. I'm thinking about becoming either an ultrasound technician or a nurse family practitioner. Parenting isn't always full of positive experiences, but if I help improve someone's life, that would be my dream career.

When I've been connected to other young moms who've just found out that they're pregnant, I tell them, "I have phone numbers for you. There are resources."

I tell them, "You're not alone. Yes, this is terrifying, but it can be done. And it could be the best thing to happen to your life." ●



Visit **hmhb-LIFTS.org** and search for "**Home Visiting**" to find home visiting programs in your area. You can also browse the service types "**Lactation Support**," "**Housing**," and "**Family Support and Education**" to find additional local resources.



A FRESH START IN DENTAL HEALTH

BY VIOLET KILLSNIGHT

As a parent, taking charge of my own children's dental health was about starting fresh. I want them to have what I didn't have as a kid, including the simple things like the structure and routine of regular doctor and dentist visits.

When I was a child, dental care wasn't a priority in my family - we were just trying to survive.

My parents weren't in the picture, and I was one of five being raised by my grandmother.

She was very sick for many years with lung disease from smoking and then breast cancer. She did the best she could, but she could barely breathe, let alone keep up with us. If we ate sweets and didn't want to brush our teeth, no one was going to make us - and kids are going to be kids.

My husband and I first moved back to Missoula from Butte almost nine years ago with two of our kids. We've had two more children since then. When I first came to Dr. John Loberg at Children's Dentistry of the Rockies - at a recommendation from a mom's group that I was in - it turned out that all my kids needed dental work.

Dr. John never made me feel guilty about this. In fact, he did his best to make our family feel at ease and as comfortable as possible. We were able to get the necessary procedures scheduled and get everyone started on regular six-month check-ups and cleanings. The staff and the environment are so warm and welcoming, and they have gone out of their way for us.

My youngest daughter ended up having to get teeth pulled in the front and caps in the back. One time Dr. John even came in on a weekend. His wife played with my kids in the reception area while I was with my daughter during the procedure. That was amazing to me.

He's also motivated the whole family to take responsibility for their dental health. My kids now want to brush and take care of their teeth without me constantly reminding them. My oldest is nine now and she is in the process of getting braces. She's been through a lot of dental work. Maybe because of that, she's now very diligent with brushing and flossing. We're covered through Medicaid, and to not have that burden of worrying about how to pay for such an essential need has allowed us to set ourselves up for good dental health habits for years to come - like getting them to their six-month appointment. That is a priority now, to catch any decay early on and deal with it.

I have a hard time trusting people, especially when it comes to my kids. With that in mind, I've never had anyone go as far to care for them as they've grown up as their dentist. That's definitely helped build that trust back, a little bit at a time.

I can't say how much peace of mind that has brought to me as a mother. ●

Photo by Gwyneth Hyndman



Visit **hmhb-LIFTS.org** and search for "**Dental Services**" to find dentists in your area who accept Medicaid.



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CREATING SPACE TO CELEBRATE

BY TARAE WHISTLING ELK & DIONA BUCK



Home was sometimes the only place we felt safe – so we would have to choose between going to the powwow or staying home, but feeling isolated and alone. That can be especially hard mentally for postpartum moms.

These grandmothers bring their families to see this space now and are so enthusiastic. I think they are the best advertisers for this resource. More and more families know the Family Care Space is here for them and we are starting to hear that parents are counting on us being at events.

We set up a little differently at each event, with donated toys our community brings – maybe a high chair, a jumper, or an area rug for the babies who are crawling, alongside the changing station. We have a rocking chair and sometimes the moms just want to come in to nurse and cool off from the heat. Last year, there was a line of parents waiting to change their babies, so we upgraded to two changing stations. That's how needed this is.

And the Family Care Space isn't just for mothers. I always remind the dads that this space is for fathers to use as well. They usually hold back a little and stand outside. I'll tell them, "Hey, you guys can come in – Mom might need your help here." So they will come in, but I find they prefer to be invited.

TARAE:

I always embrace "family" in the Family Care Space. This is going to be our third year setting up at our Northern Cheyenne All Chiefs Powwow, and I know I couldn't do this without the help of my husband, son, and three daughters.

Together, we harvested the poles for the teepee in the Bighorn Mountains. My husband sets these up and my children now know how to make it secure and comfortable. It takes all of us working together to have this space available.

I wear a lot of hats in the community. I'm an Indigenous recovery doula, a lactation counselor and I also work at the local school, so I know many of the parents and grandparents who stop by to talk and take a look at the Family Care Space. They get so excited and sometimes say, "This is what I needed when my kids were little." That's when we get to hear their stories.

Through the years, when mothers like me came to these celebrations and events, there was no quiet and private place to nurse or change our babies unless we went back to the car.





One time, there was a father who came to us with his baby, in a panic. The mom was dancing in a performance at a powwow and the family was from out-of-state and didn't know as many people here. Their baby's bottle and formula had been lost. But we had extra bottles here and donated formula so we were able to help.

The Family Care Spaces are growing, and it's so amazing to watch this trust being built. I just love it. Especially because it's for our people, our community, and our families.

DIONA:

As a working mom of four, I'm able to bring that lived experience to my role in the maternal health field.

In 2023, I was at my first outreach event as the engagement coordinator for MOMS (Montana Obstetrics & Maternal Support) at the Billings Powwow. At the time, my youngest was two years old and was still in diapers. When she was ready for a change, I took her to the nearest bathroom – that's when I realized that the changing caddy was stationed right in front of the door.

The door had been propped open because the traffic was just so busy with people coming and going. I felt really uncomfortable having to change my baby right there. I didn't want to have to take her out to my car across the parking lot in the cold. So we went into the bathroom stall and I changed her standing up, which worked but definitely wasn't ideal.

When I was back at the outreach table, I had a conversation with my coworker, Stephanie Fitch, about attending these events as a parent. I said to her, "You know, as Native people, we come together a lot to celebrate. Powwows are such an important time for us to gather."

But one thing that often isn't taken into account when these events are being planned is a designated space for moms and babies that offers both inclusivity and privacy. A space where they can go and know it is intended for them to wind down and relax, change their baby, breastfeed in a nurturing environment, and even take a moment to learn about resources available to support parenting.

That's when I started putting on my outreach hat.

The idea settled in that night when I was back home. I thought about the need for a simple guide to establish a space that Tribal communities and urban Native communities can utilize – and how to best implement these spaces into each community, with practical strategies and recommendations.

The idea of a family care space is not the first of its kind. But within Tribal communities, this is unique because we are bringing our culture and making this exclusive to moms and babies.

Stephanie and I kept talking about this and she said, "Would you be willing to write a guide?"

Photo by Rezolution Photos



Now the Family Care Spaces are in seven Tribal communities and three urban Native communities. They are accessed through Tribal programs, local public health departments, Indigenous doulas and lactation counselors and community-based supports.

When I see the Family Care Spaces at events I go to, I feel so happy and proud – not just proud of myself, but proud of the people who are putting this space up. It's a collective community effort to have these here for our parents and babies when we come together to celebrate. ●

Photo by Adrienne Haugen



LIFTS includes tribal-specific resources for reservation communities across Montana, gathered by Indigenous community members to reflect local knowledge, trusted services, and culturally relevant supports.



Safe Sleep: Learn, Plan and Provide

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at hmhb-mt.org



S02 Ep01 New Season Coming Soon!

The LIFTS Podcast

2:01





FINDING A PATH TO HEALING

BY TERESA WEEMS & CHELSIE WILSON

Photo by Gwyneth Hyndman

Content Note: This story includes discussions of infant loss and grief. If you are navigating a similar experience or are in a vulnerable place, please take care while reading.

TERESA:

When I gave birth in the 90s, there was little guidance for new moms – especially growing up in poverty with limited access to resources. We just chewed on ice, tightened every muscle, and did everything we could to get through labor.

I didn't have a mother who was there for me and I was primarily raised by my dad. Pregnancy and birth weren't modeled for me at home and I think this helps explain why I was white-knuckling it through every doctor's appointment alongside my daughter, Chelsie, on her pregnancy journey last year.

I was at a loss for how to help her as she was preparing to do motherhood on her own. But I knew I wanted my daughter's experience to be different from my experience almost 30 years ago.

When I went with Chelsie to meet Laura Acker from Parents As Teachers, I didn't know what a doula was and I was skeptical at first. But Laura was a wealth of knowledge – from preparation for the birth, to lactation, to car seat installation. In the months leading up to my grandson's arrival, she also taught me, as the birth partner, how to be the support person I never had. Without judgement or giving her opinion on a decision being "good" or "bad," she helped build our confidence and knowledge so that Chelsie – and myself as Chelsie's support person – could advocate for her needs when she went into labor. This was healing for me on many levels.

I was 21 when I had Chelsie and later her little sister was born. But between their births I lost my son, Aaron, in the middle of my pregnancy.

Chelsie was three at the time. She would come and cuddle, pat and kiss my belly. In her mind, this was her baby too. She had a really hard time understanding what had happened. Losing Aaron broke both of our hearts.

Back then, I wasn't given space to grieve. There was no collective understanding of how devastating this loss was.

Everything in me ached and I couldn't run away from it. I started drinking more and more.

Finally, after a pretty bad weekend I just thought, "I can't do this anymore."

I ended up wandering the aisles of a bookstore and found a book on women writing about their experience of pregnancy loss. I remember sitting on the floor of the bookstore, reading about the pain they felt and how they worked through it. These were stories confirming how I felt: That my grief was normal, right and necessary. I bought the book and went home, locked myself in my room and finished it. I made notes in the margins and reread it over and over.

I think of that book as the first step in my path to healing. I still have it.

In the hours after Chelsie gave birth to Hudson, we were in the hospital and talking about his middle name. I thought Chelsie might choose my father's name. Finally, she just looked at me and said, "Mom, I already picked out his name. I've had his middle name picked out most of my life. I've always, always known that my son's middle name would be Aaron."

I get choked up remembering that moment.

So now we have this beautiful baby boy, Hudson Aaron, who is thriving. Holding him is such a gift. And to watch my own child become this incredible mother? It makes me think that maybe I did get some things right as a young mom after all.

I'm in education now and I've worked in high-poverty schools for a number of years. I think if more people had access to resources like doula care and home visiting programs, like Parents as Teachers, we would see healthier children and healthier parents - both mentally and physically. I can say first-hand how much this resource is needed, especially in our high poverty areas in Montana. Everyone - no matter their income - should have access to this resource. It turned everything around for us.

In her role as a doula, Laura has played such an important role in healing, as Chelsie has become a mother, and I've become a grandmother. There is so much joy for us now, where there was once sadness and fear. And so much hope as we see generational cycles in my family finally being broken.



Photo provided by Chelsie Wilson

CHELSTIE:

It was Mother's Day 2025 when I found out that I was pregnant. My immediate feeling was fear. I knew deep down that the relationship I was in was unsafe, and I was living out of state, away from family, working two jobs. I called my mother in tears, and just said, "Mom, I don't know what to do."

She listened to me and told me I was an adult and the next move was my call. "But Chelsie," she said. "I do think you need to consider coming home."

I knew I needed my mom - we had already been through so much together and she is my best friend. I decided to come back to Montana on a Friday. By Monday I had given my two weeks' notice at both jobs and had started packing.

Once I was back in Montana, we started making phone calls to get connected to resources in our area. This was how we got in touch with Laura Acker, a parent educator with Mineral County Parents As Teachers and a birth doula.

Laura was an encyclopedia of knowledge through my pregnancy - I had so many questions about what my body was doing, how to have a healthy pregnancy, and what I needed to plan for in the first days and weeks as a mom. And she also introduced the possibility of hypnobirthing, which uses deep breathing and guided visualization to help with labor pains and stress reduction.



Visit **hmhb-lifts.org** and search for **"Doulas"** to find doulas and other birth professionals in your area. Search **"Grief"** or view the **grief and loss specialty guide** to connect with resources and support for families experiencing infant loss and grief.

Just the word “hypno” sounded so strange to me. But the more we discussed and researched this, I decided hypnobirthing was the method I wanted to go with when I went to the hospital. Mom agreed to be my birth partner.

I couldn’t imagine myself capable of that level of relaxation. I’ve always been sensitive to pain and discomfort and I get anxious easily. The idea that I would be able to transcend these reactions during birth was wild to me. But I wanted to give this a go.

Laura walked my mom and I through the relaxation techniques and hypnobirthing “journey” my mom would be leading me on when I went into labor. I decided I wanted this to be a hot air balloon journey. My mom is a wonderful storyteller and she and I went through the story journey she planned on taking me through, as Laura facilitated this, in the hospital room.

In the end, Mom forgot the original stories she was going to tell – I’m sure in the moment, she just got flustered and forgot the script! But she ended up taking me on this incredible journey through my childhood, adolescence and early 20s.

The hot air balloon was above us as we took a road trip across the country; it flew over the food at a buffet of my favorite restaurant when I was a child; it went over roads, rivers, forests that were part of the landscape growing up in Montana. It was like being in a dream. Laura and my obstetrician were there as well.

My vivid memory of fully returning to my mind was when they laid Hudson on me and I heard his cry, and my mom’s voice saying, “He has hair!” I just looked at Hudson and thought, “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh – here is my baby.” I was crying with joy.

Giving birth gave me so much confidence and pride in my body. I had body image issues in the past – that faded away when I was holding my son, feeling so strong and powerful. My body did this and I’ll never forget what it is capable of.

I don’t think my experience of giving birth would have been so positive without Laura. Postpartum, Laura was invaluable when it came to lactation – I wouldn’t have been able to breastfeed Hudson as long as I have without her, because there were some challenges there.

She has continued to visit and check in on me, helping me out with everything from researching scholarships for daycare so I can go back to work – which was difficult to navigate, as there was a requirement of documented child support, and for safety reasons, I didn’t have child support – to walking me through the Medicaid enrollment process, which was also confusing. She even helped install Hudson’s car seat.

This past Mother’s Day, it was incredible to look back on where I was a year ago to the day. I remember being so scared and overwhelmed. What I have now felt impossible then.

Holding Hudson – this healthy, happy baby boy – I can’t believe how far we have come. ●



Visit **hmhb-LIFTS.org** and search for **"Doula and Other Birth Professionals"** to find doula services in your area. You can also browse the service types **"Home Visiting"** and **"Family Support and Education"** to find additional local resources.

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MOVING THROUGH LIFE TOGETHER

BY ELISE PERPIGNANO

HMHB commissioned Elise to create this unique piece of art as a gift for attendees of the 9th Annual Perinatal Mental Health Conference, held in Billings, MT, in June 2026.

ARTISTS NOTE

I was born and raised in Helena and I think it was a wonderful place to be a kid. I got to run wild, climb trees, be imaginative and explore – which really formed who I am today. Early on, my family realized I was a creative child, and encouraged me to find outlets that would nourish this.

I'm still a kid at heart. This was why I was able to relate to the children in this image. Years ago, I worked in the service industry up in Glacier and I was interacting with families from around the world. I leaned on those memories a lot as I created this. I also work at the Montana Historical Society, making sure the exhibits are beautiful, but also interactive and fun. So I see a lot of the community here day to day.

I think this is what this piece is evoking: That we are moving through life together, but we are doing it in our own time, in our own way, with unique joys and challenges. And ultimately, we're all having one big experience together.



Elise is a Helena-based artist and graphic designer.
You can find more of her work at perpignano.art



How are you feeling?

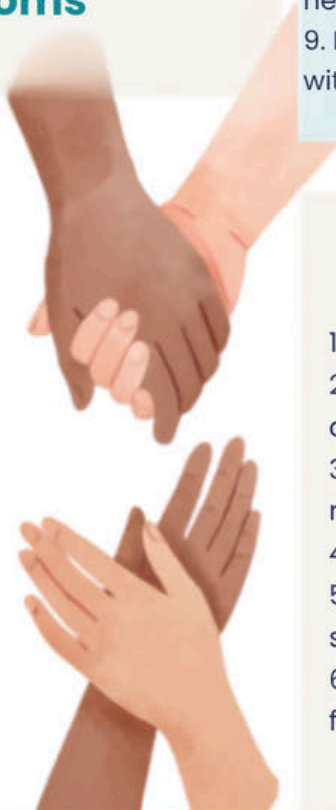
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6. You are having intrusive, scary thoughts.
7. You do not want to live anymore; you want to hurt yourself, your baby, or your other children.
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How can I find help?

1. Tell someone close to you how you are feeling.
2. Tell your doctor or your baby's doctor how you are feeling.
3. Look at the LIFTS guide. You will find great resources here: <https://hmbb-lifts.org/>
4. Ask your doctor to call MTPAL for Moms.
5. If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else, go to the nearest emergency room.
6. Ask your doctor or your baby's doctor to help you find a perinatal therapist and/or psychiatrist.



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