

"Meanwhile, babies keep being born into our hands, a reminder that each soul is precious."
—Robin Lim

IT'S BEDTIME FOR ME AND lunchtime the next day for Robin Lim, but her liveliness crosses 14 time zones, from a birth room in Bali to my bedroom in Iowa, linking two friends halfway around the world.

"I've been up for five nights in a row catching babies," Robin tells me. "And now I'm sitting with another woman who's gone into labor." Ibu ("Mother") Robin is on call 24/7 as a volunteer midwife in Indonesia.

"How do you do it?" I ask.

"It's not that hard for me. I have my staff and family to help me."

Like the "herald of spring," Robin spreads cheer wherever she goes. She combines a midwife's sharp senses with a poet's sensibility and a compassionate heart. Robin keeps several "broods" under her wings, her family of ten, extended family in the Philippines and U.S., friends in many countries, her staff, and all the mothers and children she helped bring into the world. A migratory bird with a "winter home" in Iowa and a "summer home" in Bali, Robin has begun flying back and forth to Aceh, the region on the northern tip of Sumatra hardest hit by the tsunami of December 26, 2004, spreading new growth to this devastated land. During her first visit in February 2005 to set up a clinic for tsunami survivors, Robin wrote several poems. From "Notes Taken Flying Low and Slow on a Red Cross Plane":

Sarjani's six-year-old daughter was torn from her arms.

All the mothers repeat and repeat the story of not holding onto the baby.

A water buffalo offered her horn and swam to the surface, an old cow dragging a pregnant woman skyward to leave her by the roof of the Masjid. She gave birth that evening, right on the roof of that mosque.

Seventy people found refuge there.

Imagine that one would be a birthing woman,

another a midwife.

When the water receded, they lowered the baby down

in a black plastic bag.

Like Walt Whitman, Robin has the gift of connecting her heart with her hands and voice to rise above catastrophe.

Robin's family lived in Fairfield for

Tsunami Born

Iowa Midwife Robin Lim Ministers to Newborns & their Families in Aceh & Bali

BY CAREE CONNET



Robin Lim helps tsunami survivors at her clinic at Sama Tiga, Aceh.

many years. Daughter Deja is an MUM graduate and daughter Zhouie is currently a student at the University of Iowa. In addition to receiving babies, Robin found time to write a guide for postpartum women, a cookbook for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and two collections of poems.

Newborns in Bali

Two years ago the family returned to Bali, where Robin had founded a clinic in 1994 in the village of Nyuh Kuning. Yayasan Ibu Bumi Sehat (Healthy Mother Earth Foundation) is a much-needed free clinic, especially since many people lost their jobs after the Bali terrorist bombings in 2002. Hospitals will not release a newborn baby until the bill is paid.

Robin always takes time to share emails with her family all around the world. In one, she says she spent eight hours in the hospital after she and her Balinese midwife partner realized that "the placenta was really stuck and this mom was slipping away." They decided to transport her to a hospital rather than risking going in

after the placenta. "Nyoman got the IV in and I cut the cord. We usually wait at least an hour or more, and lately have been burning rather than cutting. It's an old Chinese practice to move the chi from the placenta into the baby, which also avoids the many infection risks of cutting. Plus the babies seem to sigh, relax, and get so calm, whereas I notice they tense, or worse, when the cord is cut."

At the hospital, "Nyoman and I had to practically arm wrestle the on-duty bidan, as she immediately started to do some brutal cord traction. Dr. Wandia went in shaking. It was such a mess of a placenta that we must wait and see if she needs a hysterectomy. I've honestly never seen a placenta so 'off.'"

The mother had used all the type B blood available at the hospital, so Robin sent the husband off to get family donors. "We asked for six possible, he came back with none. I explained clearly, with Nyoman's help, that donors must be sought from her family members. Well, the husband ignored that, as 'everyone knows' that since she is married to his

family, her family has no responsibility toward her. 'So why would they want to give blood?' he asked. Clearly his family was not willing to try. If he does not come back with her sisters and brothers, I will activate my rare blood-type people. But the hospital cannot legally give blood from outside the family, so we would have to lie, and get one of his brothers to say he's married to our donor! Complicated, that's Bali culture, on the dark side of the checked cloth. So, I'm off to sleep this off a bit, then back to protect the baby from bottle feeding."

Robin recently joined the Indonesian Midwifery Association, allowing her to help with continuing education for Indonesian midwives, implementing hygienic and gentle birth protocols, postpartum care, and breastfeeding support.

Help for All in Aceh

Tomorrow Robin is taking a month's leave from her clinic in Nyuh Kuning for the beach at Cot Seulamat, but it's no vacation. She's returning for the second time to her new clinic at Sama Tiga, Aceh, a geological hot spot, malarial swamp, and rebel conflict zone, cut off from the rest of the world for over 30 years. "We hear gunfire every night near the clinic."

The Aceh clinic is a neutral place where tsunami victims, host families, military personnel, and the most marginalized peoples feel comfortable coming for help. "Some of them are very sick, or have infected injuries. There are an increasing number of malaria victims. Others are pregnant. Most all the people we saw were malnourished. 100% were traumatized. We don't ask 'Did anyone die?' but 'Do you have anyone left?' For many, just telling their story, saying the names of their dead children and wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, uncles, gave enough comfort to allow them a night's sleep, finally."

The clinic is more than a medical center, it's also a human resource center. "The roads have been destroyed, so finding where the people have gathered is often tough. We help determine who has potable water, food, clothing, and shelter . . . Putting these small rag-tag communities of traumatized people together with the large NGOs who can help them survive and perhaps recover is an important part of what we do out there. All too often people go without food and water due to lack of communication and logistical problems inherent when working in a disaster zone."

Rotating teams of volunteers for the Tsunami Relief Project come to this per-