



SEEING RED THROUGH THE BABY BLUES

Many Mothers supports moms in their most vulnerable moments • By Antoinette Villamil

When my son was an infant, I could often be found cruising the aisles of the local Whole Foods with a baby snuggled on my chest. I pointed out items to my son (“This is overpriced olive oil! It comes from Sic-i-ly, where your Granny’s people are from.”) Did I really need more groceries in the house? Heavens, no. What I needed was adult interaction, and I was happy to take it where I could get it, even from the 19-year-old cashier with holes the size of lemons in his earlobes.

For me, there was a dark secret of new stay-at-home motherhood that I’d never heard mentioned — not by any family member or friend who’d already become a mother — until I was home alone with a baby: isolation. We’d recently moved to a new town, where I didn’t have a community, and my husband was gone at work nine hours a day most days, which stretched from daylight to twilight the winter after my son was born. I spent those days using my best sing-song voice, asking questions like, “Should we change your dia-pee?” and “Is it time for boo-bie now?” I recited “Itsy Bitsy Spider” and “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” dozens of times each day to preempt infant meltdowns and slept in half-hour increments here and there.

As our families evolve in an increasingly mobile culture, where do we find community? Our patchwork tribe may be scattered across the globe, thousands of miles away. More alarmingly, a search app on one’s phone has replaced the generations of wisdom from our aunts and grandmothers. How can new mothers get the guidance they truly need?

Not surprisingly, the Center for Disease Control estimates that as many as 20 percent of U.S. mothers experience postpartum depression per year. I was one of those women, but depression, which I’d been managing most of my adult life, looked differently than it had in the past, so I didn’t seek help. Rather than tears, I felt rage. In the months after my son was born, I watched the familiar clouds approach like a hurricane, and, running on fumes after months of breastfeed-

ing difficulties, I lashed out at my husband in ways I’d never dreamed of prior. I couldn’t sleep, and I had terrifying thoughts about hurting my son.

Don’t misunderstand: I didn’t just love my baby, I *lovvved* my baby. I loved watching him conquer new tasks like sucking his thumb, or shoving his fingers down his throat while he simultaneously blew spit bubbles and babbled. I even loved changing his diapers and cleaning his many cracks and crevices. I know that staying home to raise him for nearly three years was the best choice for our family. He is mine, I am his, and I’m grateful he is here. I just wish someone had told me what to *really* expect when you’re post-expectant. With his birth, my life had gone from a flexible work-from-home job and daily meditation and yoga classes to, “My hormones are haywire, I’m so sleep-deprived I feel psychotic, and I’m alone all day with a shrieking, colicky baby and no bloody idea how to care for him.” I’d never spent time around children before, and I certainly didn’t know how to care for an infant. With a two-sided family history of bipolar disorder and suicide, I was afraid. What if I lost it one day and screamed at my baby? Or worse?

Terrified of these possibilities, I channeled my fear and anxiety into rage — not my finest decision, but the only tool I could access at the time. And so, I was angry because my baby cried so much, because I was too exhausted most days to get dressed, because breastfeeding was so painful. I was livid with my now ex-husband for doing most things just plain *wrong*, like hand-washing dishes instead of loading the dishwasher. The aftermath of my rage was one factor that eventually cost us our marriage.

Most of all, I was furious at myself: If all these other women could do it and make it look as easy-peasy as the stock photos of radiant-faced mothers, newborns snuggled in their arms, all blissed out, rested and nourished, why was I struggling so much?

I started working with Many Mothers earlier this year because I believe in what we’re doing: providing essential support to families in Santa Fe following the birth

or adoption of a baby, whether it's a first or a fourth child. All families within Santa Fe city and county are eligible for our services, regardless of socioeconomic status, race or family structure. We aim to provide each family with 36 hours of support, usually in the form of a three-hour visit per week for 12 weeks, within baby's first six months.

This support comes in many ways. It might be help with a load of dishes, or someone to play with your older children while you have time with the baby. A trained volunteer, usually a woman who has had her own children, will happily hold your baby while you do otherwise simple tasks that seem Herculean, like showering. She, or he, will talk to you as a friend. And for the love of all things holy, they will give you time to get some sleep.

Whatever they do, our volunteers are simply there to support a new mother in her most vulnerable moments, to let her know that she *will* be okay, and that she is doing a good job, despite feeling like a hot mess.

Many Mothers is designed to give moms a respite from the isolation that so many moms feel. A volunteer might also help address parenting concerns and connect families to other community resources for which they may be eligible. Each visit, and each relationship, is unique.

On a recent visit to a new mother's home, I was led inside to greet the mother and her infant son. She had been in the hospital on bed rest for nearly four months before he was even born. Now she was at home alone with him five days a week and wasn't getting much sleep. Her husband, who made the initial introductions, left the room. All it took was a gentle, "Hi, Mom, how are you do-



When her son, Maksim, was an infant, author Antoinette Villamil encountered the dark secret of new motherhood: isolation. That led her to work for Many Mothers, which matches mothers with trained, vetted volunteers who provide company, support and reassurance.

Courtesy photos

ing today?" from me, another woman who has felt what she was feeling, before she burst into tears.

When I left an hour later, I cried all the way home to my baby, who, at nearly 5 years old, was and still is the most magical, mysterious creature I've ever encountered. Spending time supporting new mothers and their babies is good work, and it's healing for me, but it also dredges up the memories of those first couple of years. I am heartbroken some days when, instead of just remembering my baby's smiles and coos, what I recall most is the difficulty, the sheer helplessness I felt at trying to care for this little person when there was no one to take care of *me*, to make sure I was fed, rested and showered.

We are not meant to raise children in a vacuum. We are meant to raise our babies in

tribes, within a community of friends and extended family, with guidance from other women and the camaraderie that comes with it. Many Mothers' volunteers give moms the opportunity to sit with another woman who has experienced the myriad bittersweet emotions and sense of upheaval she is experiencing. Being held in another woman's presence allows a new mom to speak honestly about how she's *really* feeling, instead of trying to pretend that every aspect of motherhood is the same cheerful shade in which she's painted her new baby's room.

Antoinette Villamil is the program manager for Many Mothers. She holds an MFA in poetry from New Mexico State University and has taught high school and college level writing classes, most recently at the Institute for American Indian Arts and New Mexico School for the Arts.

GET A VOLUNTEER; BE A VOLUNTEER

Many Mothers is designed to provide nonjudgmental support to any family within Santa Fe city or county. We meet with you in the comfort of your home to discuss your needs before matching you with a trained and vetted volunteer who will support you and your family.

Due to the sensitive nature of working with a family, we require volunteers to attend our four-hour volunteer training, provide three character or work references, and allow permission to participate in a national background check.

We ask that volunteers commit to supporting each assigned family for two to three hours per week for 12 weeks. Help at occasional community or fundraising events is also appreciated.

Many Mothers provides additional training and resource groups on a monthly basis for volunteers to maintain a connection with Many Mothers staff and fellow volunteers.

Since we work with families from all socioeconomic groups and structures, including families who are new arrivals in the U.S. and may not speak English, we have a particular need for Spanish-speaking volunteers.

If you'd like to be a volunteer or receive support, please contact Antoinette Villamil, program manager, at (505) 695-2075 or antoinette@manymothers.org.

OBTENGA O PRESTE APOYO DE VOLUNTARIA

El programa Many Mothers (Muchas Madres) está diseñado para proporcionar apoyo sin prejuicios a cualquier familia dentro de la ciudad o el condado Santa Fe. Nos reunimos con usted en la comodidad de su hogar para hablar de sus necesidades antes de asignarle una voluntaria capacitada y sin antecedentes penales, quien le apoyará a usted y a su familia.

Debido a la naturaleza delicada del trabajo con familias, se requiere que nuestras voluntarias asistan a una capacitación de cuatro horas, presenten tres referencias de trabajo y nos autoricen para que podamos verificar sus antecedentes penales.

Además, las voluntarias deben comprometerse a apoyar a la familia que se les asigne dos o tres horas por semana, durante 12 semanas. Su ayuda en eventos comunitarios o de recaudación de fondos ocasionales también se agradece.

Muchas madres proporciona capacitación adicional y grupos de apoyo mensualmente para que las voluntarias mantengan una conexión entre ellas y con el personal del programa.

Puesto que trabajamos con familias de todos los grupos socioeconómicos y estructuras, incluso familias recién llegadas a EE. UU. y que no hablan inglés, necesitamos voluntarias que hablen español particularmente.

Si desea ser voluntaria o recibir apoyo, comuníquese con Magali Campos, coordinadora del programa, en el (505) 570-5750 o magall@manymothers.org