



## BIRTH COMPANION PROGRAM: A SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

In 1989, there were 325 babies born to teen mothers in Ottawa-Carleton. Most of these women gave birth alone or accompanied by a young, inexperienced friend. Many were lacking a reliable, stable social support system.

In response to this situation, the Birth Companion Program was established in November 1990, by **Mothercraft Ottawa**. Community volunteers provided practical support and resources to pregnant teenagers who, in the past, were very alone and isolated.

The program has since more than doubled in size with over 120 pregnant women matched yearly with a trained volunteer who has knowledge about pregnancy, childbirth, and infant care. It has expanded to include women who are isolated for reasons other than age, including women with histories of addictions, mental illness, and domestic violence as well as newcomers to Canada. In 2007, 56% of our clients were new Canadians.

Women involved with the Birth Companion Program are supported during pregnancy, labour and delivery, and in the early weeks of parenting. The Birth Companion Volunteer encourages the mother-to-be to attend prenatal classes, obtain regular medical care and prepare for the arrival of her baby. She provides information to the expectant mother about the use of community resources such as: nutritional counselling, applying for subsidized housing, child care, and obtaining educational counselling. The Birth Companion is on-call to attend the entire labour and childbirth of her match. She offers comfort measures, partnership, and supports the woman in her communication with hospital staff. The end goal is for a healthy baby, and a good beginning to the mother-child relationship. During the first few weeks after the baby is born, the Birth Companion visits the new mom and assists her in adjusting to her role as a mother. This is a very important time to promote mother-child bonding and to provide support in establishing successful breastfeeding.



In 2008, Mothercraft Ottawa launched the Mothercraft Birth Support Initiative. This initiative provides doula services to low and middle income families on a sliding fee scale. As a result, the benefits of trained support during pregnancy and labour are available to more Ottawa families. Revenues from the Mothercraft Birth Support Initiative are used to support the Birth and Parent Companion Program.

Through the provision of one-to-one support by committed, non-judgmental volunteers, we hope to bolster the self-esteem and confidence of new mothers and to assist them and their babies in a bright future.

*"I am so thankful for this program, allowing young and low income parents such as my fiancé and I to give our children the best start to life and an equal opportunity to explore our options." – Melissa*

*"...Thank you for your support, for giving me a birth companion...[She] is a wonderful person, she was there for me before, during and after delivery to date. She was extremely good to me, thank you again." - Maryan*

The Birth Companion Program receives generous community support and is funded in part by the City of Ottawa, the Ontario Early Years Centres, and the United Way. We gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Community Foundation, the United Way, Crime Prevention Ottawa, the many individuals who donate to the program, and our dedicated volunteers.