

PROFILE: THE NEW KID ON THE BLOCK – BERKSHIRE BABY BOX

By Hannah Van Sickle

It was a fervent need to take action—fueled by post-election outrage and motivation to contribute in a meaningful way—that got Hinda Bodinger thinking outside the proverbial box. The subsequent realization that it takes a veritable village to rally around expectant mothers and connect them to community support found the South Egremont resident looking inside the box—the baby box, that is—and just like that Berkshire Baby Box (BBB) was born. The now thriving nonprofit, begun just 18 months ago, distributed nearly 700 baby boxes in its first year—to families throughout the Berkshires—in a county-wide initiative aimed at facilitating the health and success of all new families.


A quick tour of the BBB headquarters—housed in Bodinger’s newly renovated two-car garage and full basement—reveals myriad cardboard boxes overflowing with all things baby related. A cursory glance exposes hundreds of fitted sheets and cotton washcloths, a towering stack of Huggies wipes, dozens of packages of newborn Swaddlers, ten cases of Halo SleepSacks, and cartons upon cartons of children’s books. “The whole community is welcoming your child,” says Bodinger of the overwhelming support she has experienced since launching BBB.

“It was never just about the box,” Bodinger explains, whose goal is to reach mothers, often in the throes of isolation regardless of circumstances, and provide an incentive to connect with a community of support. The actual box, widely used in Finland for the past 75 years, serves as a safe sleeping space for babies up to eight months. Each of its contents, however, provides an opportunity for discussion. Bodinger calls it, “a springboard for discussion,” and the topics range from family planning (thanks to the inclusion of condoms) to safe sleep initiatives (compliments of the Halo SleepSacks, wearable blankets that help protect babies from SIDS.)

“One should not have to be at risk or have a child in crisis to get support,” says Bodinger whose work aims to normalize the challenges of motherhood. Her hope is that this will lead to empowerment. BBB offers boxes to all expectant mothers, regardless of income, as an incentive to connect them with prenatal care. At present, the boxes are available at workshops—offered throughout the county—that often serve as the first step in connecting mothers with a network

of support. Through education and outreach, Bodinger is making a mark that is both invaluable and costly.

While the distribution of each Berkshire Baby Box is done at a fraction of the \$350 retail cost—thanks to discounted nonprofit pricing and generous donations—a more sustainable model is necessary. Hinda Bodinger and her husband, Bill—who she credits with sourcing, inventory and tech support—are limited by funding. At present, the venture has been floated by small grants and roughly 200 individual donations. And if given the opportunity to expand? Bodinger would like to build and grow a board, in order to call on the experience of others in the community to write grants, seek funding and generate support for her mission.

In the meantime, Bodinger remains optimistic: “The universe has conspired to make this happen,” she says noting that “a totally random thing happens, and then you find it is not random at all.” And so, at the end of a winding dirt drive deep in South County, the staging area for Berkshire Baby Box is twofold: literally, there is space to pack boxes with valuable tools for building healthy families; figuratively, a platform has been created for destigmatizing the need for support and guidance around having a new baby, both tangible gifts for the community at large. 

Congratulations to Berkshire Baby Box, winner of the 2017 Nonprofit Excellence Award in the Small Nonprofit category. Each year, the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network honors the passion and impact of leaders in the state’s nonprofit sector. Hinda Bodinger traveled to the Massachusetts State House in Boston on June 5th—Nonprofit Awareness Day—where she was one of six honorees cited for improving communities across the Commonwealth from the Cape to the Berkshires. Liana Toscanini, of the Nonprofit Center of the Berkshires, was among the crowd of nonprofit, business and community leaders present when Bodinger delivered her acceptance speech and was presented with citations from the offices of State Representative William “Smitty” Pignatelli and State Senator Adam G. Hinds.