

TEDDY

Treatment

Austin Film Society Grant 2023

When Timothy was 11 years old, he asked his mother about the day he was born in Houston, Texas. He learned that his mother experienced severe complications during labor; he was delivered in an emergency C-section that saved his life.

His mother's birth story inspired him to help others have better birth outcomes as a form of medical justice: "I can't physically have children...so the next best thing for me to do is help those who can," he explains.

The most recent (December 2022) [Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee report](#) found that Black women in Texas are twice as likely as White women to die from pregnancy and childbirth.¹ It also found that 90% of all maternal deaths in the state were preventable. According to a 2023 study published by the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#), the maternal mortality ratio in the United States has doubled in the last 20 years.² Globally, this ratio has been nearly cut in half in the same period. Its abstract concludes "median state MMR [maternal deaths per 100 000 live births] for the Black population remains the highest in the US."

With abortion banned in Texas and persistent maternal healthcare disparities across the state and the rest of the country, individuals like Timothy are taking matters into their own hands. As a doula working predominantly with Black women, Timothy prepares, educates, and advocates for his pregnant and birthing clients. His presence helps them achieve a positive, safe, and empowering birth that is on their terms. As he puts it, "I'm able to reach people that look like me...letting them know that no matter where you come from, no matter how much money you have, you deserve to be treated how you want to be treated and do the things that you want to do. This is your birth."

"TEDDY" will follow Timothy in the early stage of his career as he continues to establish himself as a working doula in Houston. The film will explore Timothy's passion for birth work and the unique support he brings to his clients and their families as a male doula. During the pandemic, he enrolled in a 12-week full-spectrum doula training course with Black Owned and Queer Led Birthing Advocacy Doula Training (BADT) that equipped him with the necessary knowledge and skills to approach his work with a justice-based lens. In their own words, BADT "courses are designed to be socially conscious, culturally appropriate, diverse, and action-oriented."

While Teddy will never experience pregnancy and birth physically himself, his education and dedication to the well-being of his birthing clients have laid the foundation for him as a male birth worker. Before he started his doula training, Timothy was worried about how other birth workers would receive him, "I honestly felt that there was gonna be a stigma about me...like they're

¹ Texas Health and Human Services, Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee Report, December 2022.

² Fleszar LG, Bryant AS, Johnson CO, et al. Trends in State-Level Maternal Mortality by Racial and Ethnic Group in the United States. *JAMA*. 2023;330(1):52–61.

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automatically going to think the worst and they're not going to even try to get to know me and know my true intentions at heart. I can honestly say that it was the complete opposite.”

Male doulas are extremely rare. I'm aware of only one other male doula in Texas out of very few nationwide. Yet, despite being in the minority, these men can offer unique physical support to pregnant people and emotional support to their male partners. Doulas are powerful figures in the fight to reduce maternal mortality — research from the [Office of Health Policy](#) found that expectant mothers paired with a doula have a reduced risk of adverse birth outcomes.³

The film will visit Timothy working directly with his clients in all stages of pregnancy: prenatal appointments, labor and delivery, and postpartum appointments. In these spaces, the viewer will witness both the benefits and tensions of being a man who is working in intimate spaces with pregnant people and their partners.

In the event that a medical provider is not properly addressing a client's concerns about their birth preferences or the pain they are feeling, Timothy steps in to advocate for them. More often than not, his clients birthing in a hospital will not have Black OB-GYNs. This means that Timothy's role as an advocate in the labor and delivery room becomes all the more important.

As seen in the sample provided, D'Amora and Vern are a couple from Houston who hired Timothy as their doula. Disappointed by a series of medical interventions at the hospital during the delivery of her first child, D'Amora is seeking Timothy's support and guidance in her second pregnancy to have an unmedicated birth at a birth center. During their final prenatal appointment, Timothy teaches Vern how to offer physical support to D'Amora while in labor, and educates them both on the stages of labor. He quickly establishes a rapport with the couple and from hereon works to build their trust and confidence in seeking the birth experience they want.

Fast forward a month, and D'Amora is in labor at a Houston birth center. Timothy sits close by as she labors in a bathtub in a low-lit room—D'Amora requested the room to be dimly lit by candles to help her relax and focus.

D'Amora is using the breathing techniques Timothy taught her throughout her pregnancy. He encourages her to stay focused on her breath during every contraction as they continue to build in intensity. The room is quiet except for Timothy and Vern's soft words of encouragement and D'Amora's vocalization of her pain as her baby descends. Without warning, she tells them that it is time to push and that her baby is right there. D'Amora's midwife now enters the room and Teddy steps aside for her to catch the baby. After three pushes, D'Amora and Vern's son, Amante, is born, at exactly noon. This was the safe and positive birth experience they had been seeking all along.

³ Sobczak A, Taylor L, Solomon S, Ho J, Kemper S, Phillips B, Jacobson K, Castellano C, Ring A, Castellano B, Jacobs RJ. The Effect of Doulas on Maternal and Birth Outcomes: A Scoping Review. Cureus. 2023 May 24;15(5).

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These verité scenes of Timothy working as a doula will be structured around an intimate and candid conversation between him and his mother. The film will frequently flashback to this conversation with the person who inspired him to become a birth worker in the first place. We will return to this conversation at different points in the film as a reminder of Timothy's consciousness and intentions as a birth worker. The conversation will frame the reasons why he embarked on this journey, and also where this path might take him.

Timothy believes that birth work is what he was put on this earth to do. He is still juggling his full-time position as a security guard as he follows his dream of becoming a full-time doula. The comfort and safety Timothy provides in his job as a security guard parallel his goals as a doula, "Being able to be that presence, being able to help people, make people feel safe and secure while they continue their everyday life...it lets me know that I'm doing the right thing." His two roles appear very different, yet he is a comforting and protective force in both.