

Health Insights Today

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Honoring Natural Health Pioneers: The Story of La Leche League

By Daniel Redwood, DC

We live at a time when the medical establishment is united in encouraging mothers to breastfeed their children. Current guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend exclusive breastfeeding for approximately the first six months of a child's life and support breastfeeding for the first year and beyond as long as mutually desired by mother and child. This is one issue on which natural and conventional health practitioners are in full agreement, backed by a strong body of scientific research.

It was not always so. Back in the 1950s, while natural health advocates supported breastfeeding, most pediatricians encouraged formula and bottle-feeding and there were few scientific studies demonstrating the health benefits of breast milk. Responding to negative cues from their doctors and others, only 18% of American women initiated breast feeding.

Birth of a Movement

In 1956, two young Chicago mothers—Mary White and Marion Tompson—decided to start a group to encourage breastfeeding mothers after meeting at a Christian Family Movement picnic in Wilder Park in Elmhurst, Illinois. They were soon joined by Edwina Froehlich, who was told at age 35 that she was too old to produce breast milk for her baby. They named their group after the Spanish word for milk, *leche*. On the La Leche League website, (www.llli.org), Mary White recalls: “We always said, back in those days, that the three main obstacles to successful breastfeeding were doctors, hospitals, and social pressures. I think the desire to breastfeed was always there along with the conviction that ‘breast is best.’ We were not promoting a product that people had to be convinced about. But very few young mothers knew anything about the ‘how to.’ Women had forgotten the wisdom of previous generations.”

What began quietly in Chicago half a century ago now ranks among the greatest success stories in the history of grassroots health organizing. The women soon started holding monthly meetings in their community and, as word spread, put in a phone line so that they could answer questions that began arriving from near and far.

At the beginning, resources were scarce. There were no books on breastfeeding. But strengthened by the knowledge that breastfeeding had been practiced successfully by virtually all mothers since the dawn of time, the founders persevered. Pivotal to the success of La Leche League was a book written by Marion Tompson and others, *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*. It was first printed in loose-leaf form in 1958 and later published as a bound book in 1963. The book is now in its sixth revised edition, with more than two million copies in print.

La Leche League Today

La Leche League International (LLLI) now has chapters across North America and in many other nations. Its website offers information in 11 languages. Local contact information is available for several dozen nations, on every continent. In the United States, even the most sparsely populated states have at least several La Leche League groups. For those living too far away to travel to meetings, both phone contacts and a variety of online options are now available.

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The LLLI website's (www.llli.org) offers information offers wide-ranging, in-depth information on topics including Breastfeeding Help, Breastfeeding and the Law, and Lactation Support and Health Care, along with Leader Pages, Links, and Publications.

The organization's fundamental message remains what it always was. LLLI "helps mothers worldwide to breastfeed through mother-to-mother support, encouragement, information, and education, and to promote a better understanding of breastfeeding as an important element in the healthy development of the baby and mother."

Margaret Meade famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Few examples in recent history illustrate this as well as La Leche League.

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