

BURKE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

# Stella Marina helps midwives in Haiti

The group provides supplies for healthy, clean deliveries.

By **THERESA DANNER**  
Special to the Catholic Herald

The midwives of Haiti's slums gripped her heart. A photo of a handful of thin women with sad eyes spoke to Meg Hanrahan of their daily suffering and despair.

With a desire to make a difference in the slums, but with little training and no supplies, these midwives often witnessed deaths of mothers and tiny infants.

Hanrahan was moved to action. She reached out to Jim McDaniel, director of Operation Starfish, who paired her with Melinda Engelbrektsson. The two women both experienced life-threatening complications in pregnancy and childbirth and knew that they and their babies would have died had they lived in Haiti.

The two parishioners of Church of the Nativity in Burke formed a new ministry under Operation Starfish — Stella Marina — with the goal of increasing healthy outcomes for the mothers and newborns by providing basic equipment and training to the midwives.

Research led Hanrahan to a list of basic supplies deemed necessary by the World Health Organization for healthy, clean deliveries. With help from two parish groups and an anonymous parishioner, Stella Marina purchased these supplies in bulk and with 70 parishioners, created 700 clean delivery birthing kits.

Routine to modern medical clinics, these items were unavailable to the midwives in Haiti who needed them so desperately: a bar of soap, an absorbent pad, string, sterile gloves, alcohol wipes, a sterile scalpel and sterile gauze. Recently they added ladies' underwear, washable sanitary pads and a nasal aspirator to remove amniotic fluids from an infant's nose and mouth.

Four years later, the ministry has expanded to include newborn kits, including basic supplies such as cloth diapers and pins, a onesie shirt, diaper changing pad, washcloth and receiving blanket. Kit-building events have been funded and hosted by sororities, baby showers, religious education classes, Girl Scout troops and a Girls on the Run school club.

Recently, the high school group at St. Agnes Church in Arlington gathered on a Sunday evening and put together 150 birthing and 150 newborn kits.

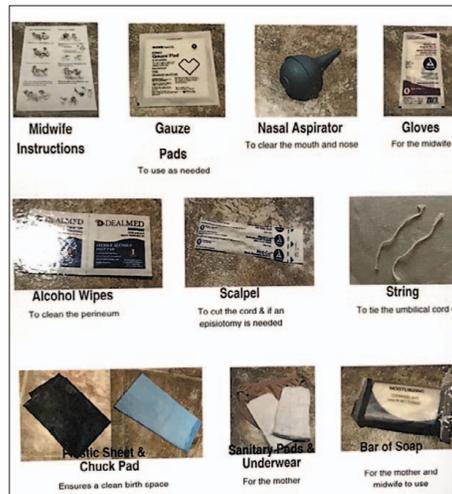
Father Rich Miserendino, who led the group, was raised in Church of the Nativity when Father Richard Martin was pastor.

"I was their age when Operation Starfish began," Father Miserendino said, "and I was absolutely gobsmacked that a piece of the world could be so changed



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Dr. Eugene Maldin, who runs the St. Anthony Clinic and founded the New Hope Hospital, assists a mother and child in the northern region of Haiti. A sign (at right) displayed at all Stella Marina events details contents of the birthing kits.



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through Christ. Every human heart has the desire to make a difference."

Annie Brickley, a Yorktown High School sophomore, was excited to make a difference in a place of such extreme poverty. "I went to Cuba this past summer and was shocked at the level of poverty there. Now I know how much help these areas need," she said.

Since 2014, Stella Marina has packaged more than 4,000 birthing and 1,500 newborn kits for the midwives in the northern Cap-Haitien region, where midwives assist in more than 15,000 births each year.

Stella Marina, through the generosity of parishioners and other donors, also provides backpacks for the midwives to carry the kits when they attend a delivery. The backpacks contain digital blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes, flashlights, and handheld Doppler units with ultrasound gel for the midwives to use. Future plans are to design portable infant scales to help the midwives monitor the growth or lack of weight gain in newborns.

Stella Marina has found partners in Food for the Poor as well as local busi-

nesses. CubeSmart and Interstate Van Lines have donated storage space for the supplies and finished kits. INOVA hospital created training videos for the midwives.



STEVE SALDANO | COURTESY

These Haitian midwives — who worked so hard with so few supplies — are the inspiration behind Stella Marina.

## How to help

If your parish is interested in participating in Stella Marina's Mother's Day multi-parish birthing kit build in May 2019, contact Meg Hanrahan at meg@stellamarina.org or Melinda Engelbrektsson at melinda@stellamarina.org.

Food for the Poor recently noted the difference that Stella Marina has made in the northern region of Haiti. They recently decided to incorporate a dedicated maternity care space into each hospital and clinic that they build throughout the Caribbean and Central America and committed to providing supplies donated by others for the birthing kits.

Ruth Lewarne, a senior at Bishop O'Connell High School in Arlington who attended the kit build at St. Agnes, made mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Peru in the last two years, and was devastated at the conditions she saw.

"I cannot imagine having no health care at all," she said.

Her sentiment is shared by groups in Kansas, Maine and Florida who have reached out to Stella Marina and are starting similar programs at their parishes or schools.

Kit building events at conferences, sorority meetings, and over Mother's Day weekend are planned with Stella Marina providing the guidance on funding, resources for supplies, and the ability to get the finished kits to Haiti.

Stella Marina hopes to grow its mission and get more parishes involved so that they can supply a kit for every midwife-assisted birth. A photo says a thousand words. This one photo will save thousands of lives.

*Danner is a member of Stella Marina at Church of the Nativity in Burke.*