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New Redleaf Center at Hennepin Healthcare will support the mental health of new parents

By [Andy Steiner](#) | 11/18/2019



Hennepin Healthcare Redleaf Center for Family Healing, a physical expansion of Hennepin Healthcare's downtown Minneapolis hospital, broke ground last week.

For Allie Pohlad, the first days and weeks of new motherhood were nothing like she expected them to be.

“When you think about having a baby, the image that comes to mind is often that of a mother with her newborn on her chest bonding immediately after the birth,” she said, “but it doesn’t always happen that way.”

Though Pohlad, granddaughter of the late Minnesota Twins owners **Carl and Eloise Pohlad**, had what she describes as a “very healthy and standard pregnancy and birth and physical recovery,” anxiety caused by serious breastfeeding struggles made it hard for her to bond with her infant.

“It was a difficult thing to go through,” Pohlad said of that time. While she spent her first six postpartum weeks mightily struggling to make nursing work for her and her baby, Pohlad’s emotional state took a beating. “During that time it was basically impossible to feel like I was emotionally connected to my baby,” she recalled. “That is something I don’t think anyone wants to experience.”

Though Pohlad had all the advantages that any new mother could hope for, including a **postpartum doula**, a night nurse and a supportive, loving husband who took two months off work after the birth, she still struggled.

“I felt this incredible pressure to make it work from who knows where,” Pohlad said. Life as a new mother was far from easy. “I felt like a failure because no matter how hard I tried, breastfeeding just didn’t work out.”

When an attentive pediatrician, after taking note of Pohlad’s exhaustion and anxiety, told her it would be OK for her to stop nursing, Pohlad felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She realized that her laser focus on achieving one admirable goal had been distracting her from building a relationship with her infant.

“The breastfeeding thing got in the way for me,” Pohlad said. The pediatrician, she explained, “was the first person to give me permission to stop, which was what I was waiting to hear. Only when I stopped and managed not to feel guilty every single day was I able to enjoy being a new mom and really start to connect with my baby.”

This realization that parenting is hard, that even the most basic struggles can overwhelm a new mother’s brain, gave Pohlad increased insight into the universal struggle that all new mothers face.

“In a way, that’s the cool thing about being a new mom,” she said. “Any issues like postpartum anxiety or depression don’t split around ethnic or racial lines. No matter where we’re coming from, we are all susceptible to going through these kinds of issues.”

That new perspective on the world of motherhood, combined with an innate desire to do what she can to help people born into less advantage, led Pohlad to champion a \$2.25 million gift from the Pohlad family to the new **Redleaf Center for Family Healing**, an expansion of the **Mother-Baby Program** of **Hennepin Healthcare** (formerly HCMC), initiated by a \$10 million gift by the Lynne and Andrew Redleaf Foundation. [The Redleaf Foundation is also a supporter of MinnPost’s mental health and addiction reporting.]

The \$30 million project, a physical expansion of Hennepin Healthcare’s downtown Minneapolis hospital, broke ground last week.

The Redleaf Center will add to the offerings of the Mother-Baby Program to include “a more holistic array of other programs that have stemmed from the experience of the families we serve in this hospital,” explained Diana Cutts, M.D., Hennepin Healthcare interim chair of pediatrics.

The program will address the mental health needs of new parents, with a focus on the overall health of children and families, Cutts said. This approach will be “groundbreaking,” she added, because it will take a two-generation approach to treatment, looking at and beyond the immediate needs of new parents to the lifetime interest of their children.

“Pregnancy is something that doesn’t end with the physiological birth of the baby,” Cutts said. “How do we provide that kind care? Some of what is considered postpartum depression may have actually pre-existed the birth. Maybe the onset was prior to the pregnancy. We have a growing recognition that mental health has to be baked into well-woman care, into prenatal care and postnatal care. At the Redleaf Center, we will be taking that approach.”

Universal experience

Pohlad said she became interested in funding programs that serve primarily families of color after hearing a New York Times podcast and reading an accompanying article about high infant mortality rates among women of color in the United States.

“When I read that, it felt shocking and embarrassing,” she said. “It infuriated me to realize that we are living in the U.S. with all these resources and yet we have such a huge disparity in those areas and in general such a high maternal death rate.”

With the help of **Pohlad Family Foundation** staff, she began researching Minnesota nonprofits that address issues of maternal health equity.

“I stumbled on **Everyday Miracles**, a nonprofit that partners labor doulas and postpartum doulas with women from similar ethnic backgrounds,” Pohlad said. “Then we came upon the HCMC Mother-Baby Program and learned about the work that the Redleaf Foundation was doing there. We decided we wanted to get involved.”

Pohlad is right when she said that postpartum mental health issues cut across lines of race and class, Cutts said.

“One in seven women have postpartum mental health concerns. Now we are also recognizing that one in 10 fathers also experience mental health issues including depression after a birth. It’s very prevalent and very unrecognized and untreated. Only half of women who experience postpartum mental illness get help.”

When a new baby comes into the world, it can be difficult for a mother to get the mental health support she needs. Many new mothers say they can’t focus on their own needs because they need to care for their newborn. Hennepin Health’s postpartum program takes that into account, Cutts said, by

offering an intensive outpatient option where new moms struggling with postpartum mental illness are encouraged to bring their babies along to treatment.

“The program is designed for moms and babies,” Cutts said. “It is a day treatment program.” Older children can spend time at the center’s drop-in child care program. “The focus is on that primary relationship and also on building relationships with the other women in the program. The model is a group therapy model in which a lot of healing can occur.”



Hennepin Healthcare

Dr. Diana Cutts: “I think it’s really important for pediatric providers to up their game.”

The Redleaf Center will eventually offer expanded space for mind-body treatment options for new parents, including yoga and healing arts, Cutts explained. “Very near and dear to me in this new space will be a teaching kitchen that will build in nutrition classes and can also become a place where new parents can learn about the relationship of parenting as it is expressed through the preparation of food.”

‘Perfect storm’

Offering high-quality mental health support during and after pregnancy is a public health imperative, Cutts said. When new parents are given the support they need to provide essential, loving care for their infants, it has a lasting impact on society.

“There is this period of intense vulnerability for new parents,” Cutts said. “We think of this as a perfect storm.” During this high-stress time, parents “may not be operating at their highest capacity. We now know through good brain science that this is a critical time of neurodevelopment for infants. So much of healthy brain development depends on the bidirectional ‘serve and return’ relationship

that develops in the first weeks of life. This relationship needs to be really rich and healthy and positive. For a number of reasons, many new parents need extra support to make that happen.”

Because many new mothers don't take time to care for their own mental health, there is a movement among pediatricians to look beyond the child during regular well-baby checkups.

“I think it's really important for pediatric providers to up their game,” Cutts said. “One of the things I recognize as I have been involved in this work is that I've asked a lot of parents, ‘How are you doing?’ I now realize that might not be the best question, because ‘How are you *doing*?’ and ‘How are you *feeling*?’ are completely different things.”

Cutts said she now takes time to ask new mothers about their emotional state. “Parents are often very out of the system in terms of mental health care,” she said. “Accessing parents through their child's health care is a really smart thing.”

And working downstream with mothers is a way to avoid problems later on, Cutts said.



Hennepin Healthcare

A rendering of the Redleaf Center for Family Healing teaching kitchen.

“As we screen Mom for maternal depression, if she answers in such a way that indicates she is experiencing symptoms of depression, beyond saying, ‘Let's get some lactation consultant help,’ I can also say, ‘I see you're experiencing feelings of depression. Let's address that, too. Let me make a referral to a mental health provider who can talk with you and help you make decisions about your own care.’ Postpartum depression is the most common complication of childbirth with a significant mortality rate.”

Though mothers get more attention, this approach doesn't put infants on the sidelines, Cutts added.

“We are working upstream for baby. If we can intervene and treat and provide healing at this very early stage we’re going to really do so much to lay that foundation for healthy brain development and a healthy future. It is all so interconnected at this point.”

Personal struggle to public philanthropy

Pohlad said that she got past her postpartum struggles thanks to the support of friends and family who were willing to step forward when she needed them the most.

“I remember one night early on; my best friend was willing to leave her 1-year-old with her husband at 10 p.m. and come over to my house to show me how to use a breast pump. Stuff like that, which now seems like such a small thing, meant so much to me at the time.”

And Pohlad also credits her husband, “a sensitive and nurturing person who was able to carry that burden when I didn’t think I could,” with helping her through the hardest parts of first-time motherhood.

When she realized how much support like that was crucial to her survival, Pohlad knew she wanted to find a way to support other mothers in their postpartum struggles. And now that she’s getting ready to start the parenting journey once again — her second child is due in April — Pohlad is even more determined to do what she can to lend a hand to new families.

“It just seems like a no-brainer to support new moms, new parents and children in our community, especially when you delve into the research about mental health and early childhood experiences,” she said. “How could you not want to support this? It is such a crucial, fundamental piece of life. It’s a huge, amazing opportunity in which to support women.”

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