

A portrait of Cora Beitel, a young person with short, curly brown hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a nose ring. They are smiling and wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a blurred red brick wall.

ADVANCING
INCLUSIVE
MIDWIFERY
CARE FOR
LGBTQ2SIA
CLIENTS AND
FAMILIES IN
BC

Midwife of the Month Cora Beitel



MIDWIVES ASSOCIATION
of BRITISH COLUMBIA

Cora Beitel is a founding member of the Strathcona Midwifery Collective in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. They co-facilitate and organize the [Queer and Trans Pregnancy and Parenting Group](#) – a monthly group that provides support, resources and community dialogue for queer and trans folks on the parenting journey – and have been advocating for safer pregnancy and birth care for the trans and queer community through presentations, committees, and policy development. They're also a parent of two, a partner, a knitter, a weightlifter, and an avid community gardener.

MABC: When did you first become interested in midwifery?

CB: When I was 15 my stepmom was pregnant with my sister and I got really interested in her pregnancy and birth and started doing a lot of research about birth. I grew up in Montreal and moved to BC in my teens with the intention of going to midwifery school here. I took a lot of courses at Douglas College, doula training, breast feeding counsellor course, and female anatomy during childbearing years. I started taking courses and training as a doula and attending births.

Then I had my first kid in 2003 at home with midwives, at which point I was already working as a doula. Seeing midwifery from a client perspective felt exciting and at that point there was no question – becoming a midwife was what I wanted to do.

MABC: How long have you been practicing for?

CB: I graduated in 2009 and I've been practicing for 8 years. I opened [Strathcona Midwifery](#) with Martha Roberts five years ago. We started off with just two midwives and have grown to be be-



Cora and the other Strathcona Midwifery midwives preparing for the Eastside 10k for DEWC in 2016 to raise money for the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.

tween two to three teams of midwives with other health care providers in the clinic. It feels like a vibrant, growing practice.

Throughout all of my education and as a new midwife I always knew that I wanted to have a practice in the Downtown Eastside focussed on accessible midwifery care in all the different ways that that looks. Strathcona Midwifery is framed with a strong philosophy of accessible,

inclusive care.

It's a good place to be – to have a practice that I feel at home in and can grow in. And I get the opportunity to work with other people who have the same philosophy of care and interest in community involvement.

My current team: I've been working with Stephanie Dow for three years and we have an amazing time together. Just now we're

getting ready to welcome a third midwife to our team. Jill Parsons, a midwife from Toronto coming to us from 7th Generation Midwifery.

MABC: You're one of the midwives in the province providing inclusive care to the trans and queer community, and educating healthcare providers about inclusive care. Can you tell me how this came about? What inspired you to start doing this work?

CB: A big part of it for me is that I'm queer. It always felt important to me to create safe, welcoming, respectful and celebratory environments for the families in my care. Focussing on providing care for the queer and trans community felt like a natural extension of the care that I was providing to the larger Vancouver community. Creating a practice that serves my own queer community felt enriching and a very natural thing for me to do.

There is always a need for queer and trans midwifery care and there are a lot of midwives providing that care but there's always room for more.

MABC: Do you have a sense of what the major barriers would be in terms

of accessing pregnancy and respectful health care in general for queer and trans people?

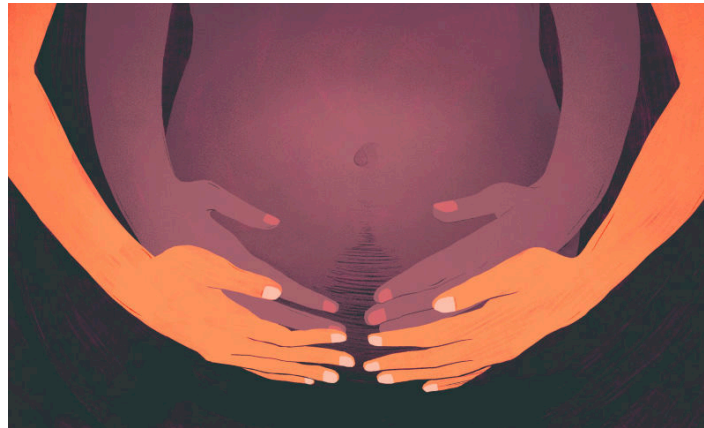
CB: It can be location specific in some ways. A queer family in Metro Vancouver may not feel like there are as many barriers to them accessing respectful care. A queer family in Vancouver could walk into any midwifery clinic here and get respectful care. I think that's the case across BC most of the time.

It's different if a practice is going out of their way to be more inclusive – whether that's in the form of materials, their website, or posters in the clinic that use inclusive language/ images – queer and trans people notice those little signals that tell them they belong in a space.

We know that trans folks avoid accessing medical care out of a real fear of discrimination. Studies have indicated that some people who are trans avoid seeking medical care because there is a high probability they will experience inappropriate, disrespectful and/or hostile care.

If you're trans and a man and are accessing pregnancy care, which is normally seen as a female domain, that can lead to a lot of mental and emotional work to protect yourself from any misgendering, confusion or discrimination that you might

encounter when accessing care. And of course, that's really exhausting during pregnancy. Anybody can feel that pregnancy is a vulnerable and tense time in their life and when



HOW CAN MIDWIVES HELP QUEER AND TRANS FAMILIES FEEL SAFE?

Click the above image to read the Jezebel article by Kathryn Jezer-Morton featuring Cora Beitel and Trevor MacDonald, a trans man who lives with his partner and two kids on a small farm in Manitoba. Trevor is a writer who has done research and advocacy work for trans parenting in Canada.

you're worried about needing to explain why you even need pregnancy care that can feel really daunting in terms of picking up a phone or filling out an intake form.

Accessing care in a city like Vancouver is different than in a smaller, rural community where there isn't the same awareness in the community or the experience of the health care provider.

A former client of mine living in rural BC had a really hard time because he was the first transgender pregnant patient his obstetrician had ever encountered. There was a lot of misunderstanding about what it means to be a transgender preg-

nant person. It was seen as a higher risk pregnancy and he was contacted by news agencies who wanted to do a story on him because his pregnancy was seen as this really

far out there, wild, interesting thing as opposed to the simple fact that he's pregnant and needs good care and community support; that's what everybody needs when they're pregnant.

When you are in a community where people don't have the awareness of what it means to care for a trans client, that can feel really scary and the client might be led to believe that their pregnancy is a high risk as a result.

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client might be led to believe that their pregnancy is a high risk as a result.

Coming to Vancouver and talking about his pregnancy, about his family, about the care that we would provide was a relief. Being told that everything was normal; his pregnancy was normal and his family was seen.

Education about what it means to care for trans patients is needed for providers around the province. Just because a person has transitioned doesn't mean their pregnancy is anymore high risk than anybody else's.

It can feel easier to access care if trans clients know that the people who are going to be providing medical care for them have experience caring for trans clients. You know that you are not going to get judged; you are going to get care that is appropriate, as opposed to sensationalized, and it makes a really big difference.

It's one thing for a queer and/or trans client to land in a midwifery clinic where they feel welcome but it's another thing to have to get tests and procedures

related to their pregnancy done out in the community. Unfortunately it's not just a question of inclusive primary health care providers, but it's the



Strathcona midwives and their families running to raise fund for the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.

entire healthcare team. The labs where clients go to do blood work, the ultrasound clinics, and the outpatient clinics at the hospital; clients encounter different levels of the healthcare system. Pregnant trans clients are constantly going into environments where they need to out themselves, where they have to deal with people misgendering them and assuming things about their identity because they are pregnant. Needing to justify why you're there and why you need care is incredibly exhausting and stressful.

That's something that myself and other midwives are taking on, trying to do as much education as possible in terms of going into hospitals and sending letters ahead of people to ultra sound clinics, etc. Calling ahead and giving people a heads up that the client later that day is a man and he is pregnant so they are not disrespectful when that client

arrives. That disrespect is what a lot of people experience and can lead to not wanting to do tests or have ultrasounds.

The majority of my trans clients plan a home birth and a big part of that is when they are in labour, when they're needing to do this intense and vulnerable work, they want the people around them to be able to honour their experience, identity and body and not be at a heightened sense of vulnerability by the potential of being misgendered while in labour. And if being at home is not possible and they need to be admitted to the hospital, setting up the people in the hospital to be respectful is super important.

MABC: Can you tell me about the Queer and Trans Pregnancy and Parenting Groups (QTPP)? When did they start?

CB: I started the groups

in 2014 with Michelle MacLean who is a local doula. We just completed our third year. We run the groups from fall until spring and then take a break for the summer.

The idea of the group was started after a conversation with one of my trans clients who was reflecting on not having an obvious place in the community that he felt welcome in terms of parenting groups. To him, a lot of the queer family groups felt centred on lesbian families and he didn't feel there was an obvious welcoming of trans families.

Another client talked about how they present as being straight because their partner who is pregnant is a [cis woman](#) and the partner is a trans man and they feel like they can walk into straight spaces and appear like they fit in. Then they go into queer spaces and feel again that they have to make space

for themselves.

What I'm hearing from a lot of people in my care is that there wasn't an obvious place where they felt at ease and felt really seen and celebrated for exactly what their family looked like.

The idea for the QTPP groups started with these conversations with clients. One day Michelle MacLean and I were having coffee and talking about the lack of spaces and we decided that the QTPP groups were something we could do at Strathcona Midwifery where we were already running groups. We both had energy for it and felt excited. We started off in the fall of 2014 by holding a community brainstorming session. Tons of people came and we had lots of conversations about what we wanted to do at these groups. Michelle and I took all of the materials from the brainstorming session and narrowed



A street view of Strathcona Midwifery Collective.

them down into overarching headings and then set up a schedule of groups; we got guest speakers to come in for some sessions, while others were facilitated conversations. We hosted community events as well.

Over time we made more connections in the community with different experts who present on topics such as: fertility, legal awareness, and mental health. Many presenters are excited to come back every year. Over time mem-

bers of the group have facilitated sessions as well. One member is really keen to do the 'Feeding Babies Talk' on feeding systems and donor milk. Another family feels passionate about art making as a way of processing feelings that can come up while parenting in a really difficult time. We really encourage folks in the groups to take on a topic.

MABC: Do you have an estimate of the number of people who have been through the groups?

CB: It's hard to estimate because there are some

people who only come for one session and then there are people who come back over time.

New people are always coming in and some peo-

ple of any other groups in the province?

CB: I'm not aware of any other groups in the province; partly because even in a big city like Vancou-

The other groups that I'm aware of are in Toronto and in Seattle. There are little one-offs in different places, like an info session that someone will put together, but in terms of an

ongoing group like the QTPP, I don't know of any others in BC.

MABC: In your view why might queer and trans families need a group like the QTPP?

CB: Because people encounter homophobia and transphobia. People encounter environments where their family is not seen, respected or celebrated. Where they

have to justify what their family looks like and why.

What I'm hearing from a lot of people in my care is that there wasn't an obvious place where they felt at ease and felt really seen and celebrated for exactly what their family looked like.

To come into a space where who you are and how you love and how you

Queer and Trans Pregnancy and Parenting Group
 Saturdays 2-4pm at Strathcona Midwifery Collective
 2016-2017

November 12th: Talking about Adoption and Fostering
December 3rd: Raising children in a challenging world and Art making!
January 21st: Feeding your baby human milk and alternatives
February 18th: Perinatal mood awareness
March 3rd: Legal Day
April 22nd: Fertility support
May 13th: Supporting Radical families and decolonizing parenting
June 10th: Changing Identities
July 22nd: Picnic!

Welcome to our 3rd year of QTPP groups! The QTPP emerged out of a community request for diverse and inclusive pregnancy and parenting spaces. This is a facilitated group that aims to create a safe space for discussion and community building for folks for identify as queer and/or trans. We request that allies support us by honouring this as a queer and trans space only.

Come to discuss these topics and to meet other folks on the parenting journey. All groups welcome to your family and kids. Snacks provided! Please come scent-free!

The Strathcona Midwifery Collective is located at 439 Dunlevy Ave at Hastings Street.
 Check out our Facebook page at Queer and Trans Pregnancy and Parenting Group
 Email us for more info or with questions at QTPPgroup@gmail.com

A QTPP group poster with session topics from last year.

ple have been part of it from the beginning. We're always reaching new families which is really exciting.

Each group will have anywhere from 3 to 15 people. It really depends on the topic, the weather and whatever else is happening that day. Some groups have been really well attended and other groups have been really small conversations. Either way it feels good.

MABC: Have you encountered people who have travelled to participate in the group? Are you aware

ver it can be hard to get people to come out to groups.

I have colleagues in Victoria who are keen to start something similar and it feels like there would be enough people to come to make it worthwhile.

Absolutely we have had people travel to come to the groups from the Gulf Islands, Northern BC and from Victoria. It has been really nice to have people from other communities come and connect and discuss building communities in a broader context.



Former and current clients at the annual Strathcona Midwifery picnic.

groups with my partner and with my baby and being able to wear different hats such as midwife and parent and as someone who self-identifies as non-binary or [gender-queer](#). I don't ask clients or hospital staff to use gender neutral pronouns for me, it doesn't feel comfortable.

Being in a same sex relationship doesn't feel all that complicated but having a gender identity that doesn't fit into a binary does. I don't want to take up any complicated space within my client relationships by correcting people when they use female pronouns for me.

parent is really honoured is important in terms of safety and in terms of letting your guard down. Queer and trans families don't just need to be respected they need to be celebrated.

I think that queer families out in straight places can feel like they are in a self-protective mode. Queer and trans people might be asked intrusive or inappropriate questions about their family and how their family came to be. Or there's surprise, not necessarily hostility, but an environment in which you are othered and being othered all the time is really exhausting. Needing to explain or feeling like you are on the outside of what is happening isn't easy. A lot of people won't go to groups

that are primarily focused on straight families because they want to feel relaxed and feel like they fit in. Sometimes your specific questions might not be answered or they might be uncomfortable to ask.

On a very basic level being around people who understand and who are excited about how you are creating family is for some people a very relaxing thing. That extends to having gender identity respected; not being misgendered. Sometimes even within a larger LGBTQ context there isn't a lot of awareness around gender identity and trans families and people can still make assumptions about your gender identity and how you parent and how you identify.

It is important to be in spaces where you feel like your identity as a person and as a parent are going to be honoured.

It's interesting having the opportunity to experience both perspectives being a midwife and having midwifery care as a queer *Education about what it means to care for trans patients is needed and helpful for providers around the province. Just because a person has transitioned doesn't mean their pregnancy is anymore high risk than anybody else's.*

family. I've been going to the queer and trans

MABC: You have so much personal and professional experience within the community do you have recommendations for a midwife who is wanting to educate themselves in terms of care for queer or transgender clients?

CB: The first step would be to do a lot of reading. There is great material out in the world: tip sheets, books and websites on inclusive care. There are also a few courses, mostly online, for health care providers on inclusive care.

Click [here](#) for a list of LGBTQIA2S pregnancy and birth resources on the MABC website.

MABC: Tell me about your life outside of midwifery. Do you have any hobbies?

CB: I weight lift and I knit. I run. Weight lifting is one of the highlights of my week. I weight lift with this fabulous group of queers and weirdos. It's a fun way to ground myself and my body. The work that I do as a midwife is physical but also heady, it's really nice to do something so different.

And I have an 10-month old! Which is so much fun. I have a 14-year old as well. It's fabulous. It feels awesome to be caring for two children at very different stages of their lives. They are growing up to be wonderful people. I love parenting and its been fun going back to the early months and years again. My partner had a home birth that was amazing.

I try to be outside as much as possible. Gardening in our community garden plot or going on nice long walks with my family and our little dog on the beach or the North

Shore mountains. I like being in open green spaces, it's good for my soul. Whether it's camping trips or a hike or just a picnic in a park or gardening in our little community garden box.

We live in a co-op with our extended family. There's lots of kid time, barbeques and family downtime.

MABC: Do you want to be or are you actively pursuing more presentations on inclusive care?

CB: There are lots of other people who are interested in doing this work and it is a message that needs communicating in different ways by different people. At the end of the day I'm quite happy just being a midwife and running groups in my community. I'm hoping to help other midwives take on more of these presentations over time.

MABC: Having so much lived experience as a non-binary person and a parent yourself, does it feel tokenizing to often be the BC midwife who

speaks publicly about trans and queer care?

CB: I also don't feel very comfortable presenting myself as an expert or presenting my practice as the only practice doing this work.

The next conversation that I want to be part of is how we care for ourselves as queer or trans midwives. How do we feel safe in our work in terms of coming out or not coming out? Honouring the emotional weight of being midwives, our safety, our self-care, integrating our identity with our clinical practice. Amongst ourselves as midwives: how do we see each other, honour each other, keep each other safe, celebrate each other and have community conversations?

That isn't a conversation I've been having because as a midwife I haven't been focussed on my peers, I've been focussed on my

patients – making sure that they are being seen, that they have safe, good care. In order to do that we as midwives also have to make sure that we are safe.

It felt important to put myself forward and take up this space within the conversation about inclusive pregnancy care because this isn't an abstract conversation about some person you might meet some day in your care, this is as much about that person who might walk in your door as it is about us as midwives. I am a genderqueer person and a midwife and a parent.



Cora and baby Razi.

BC Midwife of the Month is a monthly profile series presented by the Midwives Association of BC. This series honours practicing midwives for their extraordinary contributions to current issues facing the profession and serves to introduce the public to a broad spectrum of midwives working in BC.

