



Sonya Nachman founded the Into Safe Arms program in 2002.

The Law — and Love — Save a Baby

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

SONYA NACHMAN'S VOICE IS LIGHT as she talks about her success:

"We're all very excited," she says. "It was the very first one."

Someone called the Into Safe Arms hotline first, she explains. And then "they" brought in the baby.

"They" isn't exactly right.

She knows it was just one person who surrendered his or her newborn baby to a hospital last fall, but she doesn't want to say who. And she doesn't want to say which Peninsula hospital.

She's afraid to do anything that might jeopardize Into Safe Arms or the state law that al-

lows parents of unwanted newborns to take their baby to a hospital.

With no questions asked, the hospital then ensures that the child is placed with a family through Social Services.

Nachman, former president of the National Council of Jewish Women, Hampton Roads section, founded Into Safe Arms three years ago after a year of meetings with Commonwealth Attorneys in Newport News, Hampton and Williamsburg and hospital officials. She convinced Mary Immaculate

Hospital, Riverside Regional Medical Center, Sentara CarePlex and Williamsburg Community Hospital to accept newborns and the Commonwealth Attorneys to not prosecute the parents.

Then the next year, 2003, she convinced the General Assembly to pass a law allowing all hospitals and Commonwealth Attorneys to do the same.

Yet, even with the law on her side—and desperate new parents' side—she's cautious. If too many details get out when a child is surrendered, people could start connecting the dots and figure out who gave up his or her baby. If that happened, the next desperate mother or father may not seek help at the hospital—and instead harm the child.

So all Nachman will say is that the little girl brought to the hospital was healthy and oh-so-little.

Her umbilical cord was still attached.

She doesn't know how the parent—or friend or family member—who brought her in learned about the program. Working with Waters Advertising, she and the other Into Safe Arms volunteers have publicized the program through appearances on radio and TV talk shows, brochures, posters and billboards. The participating hospitals also have a dedicated program coordinator who promotes the program to staff and the community.

While their work has obviously worked miracles, Nachman worries:

What else should she do?

She's reached out to local sororities, both to promote the program to them and enlist their help in advertising it—but they haven't been receptive.

She's also contacted Southside hospitals, hoping they'll join Into Safe Arms. While they obviously have to follow the law, they might do more to publicize it if they were part of the organization.

Kim Van Sickle, a public relations representative with Sentara, left a phone message at *Port Folio* explaining why the chain of hospitals chose not to participate on the Southside. While the Peninsula Commonwealth Attorneys agreed to support the program before it became law, support was not as clear on the Southside. When the law later passed, Sentara educated employees and made informational packets available to everyone in its emergency and maternity wards, she said.

Her bottom line: Sentara is in compliance with the Safe Haven for Newborns policy.

Still, they're not advertising it.

A new organization has just formed in Alexandria that may be able to give Nachman the guidance she wants to grow her program. Called the National Safe Haven Alliance, the organization will serve as a resource for the dozens of similar programs throughout the country. They will also work to introduce and standardize baby surrender laws.

In Virginia, an unharmed newborn who is not more than 14 days old can be surrendered. Head south, north, or west, and the law will be different—or non-existent.

"It will be so nice to make one call (instead of calling numerous programs in the country) and get the information and support I need," says Nachman.

And it will be so nice if all states protect newborns with a surrender law. ●

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