

Tonya Lewis Lee Aims to Save Nation's Babies

About the Guest of Honor



Tonya Lewis Lee, an award-winning TV producer, released the documentary "Crisis in the Crib" last year after learning of the high infant mortality rates among African Americans. She's also launched a grassroots program to encourage healthy living. (WOMENSENEWS)

A robust African American man sits motionless, staring into an incubator. His round face wears worry like a coat. Inside the incubator his daughter, Tatiana Candace Miles, who was born 1 pound, 13 ounces, rests with tiny bandages covering her even tinier eyes.

"I sit here every day," he says, "and if I could just take her pain away, I would. This is my second preemie child. My first child was 29 weeks, she weighed 2 pounds. I thank the Lord she overcame it. It just hurts when you see someone you love and you really can't do anything for them. Until you have a child like this of your own, you can never really understand."

This is a scene from "Crisis in the Crib--Saving Our Nation's Babies," a groundbreaking documentary released in September 2009 with screenings in select cities. The film offers faces and voices to the maternal and infant mortality problem in the United States in general and in the African American community in particular, where the rate is twice as high as in the general population.

A low birth weight infant is one of the three leading causes for infant mortality. The other two are congenital malformations and sudden infant death syndrome or SIDS.

In addition, some of the risk factors that contribute to infant mortality are disproportionately found in the pregnant women in the black community: late prenatal care, poor nutrition and obesity.

The documentary is a project of the Office of Minority Health, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The force behind it: Tonya Lewis Lee, an attorney and award-winning television producer and the wife of filmmaker Spike Lee.

Marker of a Nation's Health

"The infant mortality rate is a marker for the health of a nation," said Lee, a spokesperson for the Office of Minority Health's "A Healthy Baby Begins With You" campaign since 2007. "And I know that all of those babies lost to infant mortality are important resources lost to us all." Much of the documentary was shot in Memphis, Tenn., where on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King--whose birthday is observed today as a federal holiday--was assassinated by a sniper's bullet.

In 2008, Memphis acquired another notorious distinction--the highest infant mortality rate of any major city in the United States. It had 692 dead babies over a four-year span and a rate of more than 15 deaths for every 1,000 births, more than twice the U.S. average.

Broken down by zip code, centering on the poorest places in this very poor city, there are areas where babies die at a higher rate than they do in some developing countries, such as Vietnam or Iran.

A devoted mother herself, Lee has two children, Satchel, 14, and Jackson, 11. A lawyer by trade, Lee worked primarily on corporate and First Amendment issues and then transitioned from practicing law to writing and TV production.

In 2004, she served as executive producer of the documentary, "I Sit Where I Want: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education," for which she received both the Beacon and Parents' Choice awards.

Tonya Lewis Lee

Shocked by Death Rates

An outspoken and respected voice on the issues of women and race, Lee says she was shocked to learn of the high maternal and infant mortality rates in the United States. She was even more distressed to see the even higher rates in the African American community and to learn that education and class do not protect women from this epidemic.

"When I realized that the World Health Organization ranked the United States 29th in the world in infant mortality I had to become involved," said Lee.

"American children are dying at the rate of third world countries. It's a shame and it doesn't have to be that way if we educate the public on the problem and begin to work on eradicating some of the causes."

To start changing things in Memphis and across the country, Lee has created a program where college students work at the community grassroots level, sharing everyday healthy living messages with male and female peers well before they think about pregnancy.

Called the Preconception Peer Educator Program, its members visit high schools and colleges and host community health fairs to raise awareness and get people talking about practical and political solutions.

Beyond Eating Right and Exercise

"This is beyond just telling people to eat right and exercise," said Lee. "It's about us advocating for safe places so that they can actually exercise. It's about us teaching others to advocate for fresh fruits and vegetables in neighborhoods that don't have them."

The students, mostly from nursing or public health concentrations, are trained in a 10-hour preconception curriculum and produce a health fair. Then they are placed in Healthy Start programs, state or city health departments, state Offices of Minority Health or community-based organizations for placement in summer internships, volunteer or paid work opportunities.

The documentary features peer educators canvassing door-to-door in Memphis, talking to residents and sharing information about infant mortality. The students come from Spelman College in Atlanta; Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn.; Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn.; Morgan State University in Baltimore; the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing in Philadelphia; and LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, Tenn.

Beyond their health-related activities, the film also follows the students on a moving visit to the civil rights museum and the site of King's murder in the Lorraine Hotel.

"It was important for me to make that connection with them that what they are doing is part of a movement," said Lee. "The message of a healthier lifestyle is our generation's civil rights movement."