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4th Annual Black Midwives and Healers Conference Comes to Atlanta

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The International Center for Traditional Childbearing (ICTC) will host its 4th Annual Black Midwives and Healers Conference October 14 –16, 2005 in Atlanta, Georgia. This event not only celebrates the historical contributions black midwives made in the United States, it's also a forum to educate midwives, healers and attendees on how to reduce the rate of infant mortality. SisterSong supports this tremendous event, and SisterSong member Dazon Dixon Diallo who will receive the "Outstanding Leadership Award."

The conference is the brainchild of Shafia Monroe, a veteran midwife and founder of ICTC, a SisterSong member organization. During the 1970s, Monroe received formal midwifery training at the Massachusetts Midwives Alliance and mentored under midwives from Ghana, Zaire and Alabama. As a self-appointed community outreach spokeswoman for midwifery she discovered that there were few black women studying the age-old tradition or few who even knew midwifery was still an option for childbirthing. Thus in 1976, she founded ICTC to foster more black midwives, and educate women on midwifery and its historical relevance to our society. In order to support her vision and create international awareness, Monroe also established the Black Midwives and Healers Conference.

In October, Monroe is expecting midwives from all over the world, including Haiti, Africa, Bermuda and Canada. The three-day session has a variety of workshops and panels to address all issues involving women's health before, during and after pregnancy from a holistic perspective. Some of the workshops discuss traditional herbs used during delivery, eliminating environmental toxins from your home, postpartum depression, as well as breast cancer prevention, STD's, making natural baby products and rediscovering your sexual self.

While the late night swims and Afro-aerobics are fun activities for participants, Monroe is serious about the conference bringing awareness to the high infant mortality rate among black women. "Black women have the highest infant mortality rate in this country, but midwifery can help lower it," says Monroe. A routine prenatal visit with a healthcare practitioner usually lasts about 15 minutes. The visit includes a blood pressure and heart rate check-up. According to Monroe, a visit with a midwife lasts about 45 minutes. Midwives educate the women on their eating habits and listen to them as they express their emotions. "We know stress causes all types of health problems. Stress makes women birth their babies too soon. They're coming out 29 weeks or 32 weeks. We work with the mother to lower her stress to reduce the chance of infant mortality. Also, midwives strongly promote breastfeeding. Babies born too small have a better chance of living and developing an immune system when breastfed."

For Monroe, midwifery isn't just about birthing a baby; it's about birthing a community. Midwives were the spiritual backbone to the African American community and she welcomes men to complete the circle. She's also excited about young women expressing interest in learning the tradition. "We really don't hear about the contributions of black midwives in this country. I can't imagine how many of our Presidents were delivered by a black midwife and got their nursing from a black midwife. I wanted to have an institution for young people that reflected the history and so many college students have signed up. I can't express the excitement I have. Everyone is coming together and that's what I wanted." The 4th Annual Black Midwives and Healers Conference will take place October 14 – 16th, 2005 at the Holiday Inn Select in Atlanta, Georgia. For information about it or ICTC, visit www.blackmidwives.org