

(introductory music)

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MARYN: Welcome to Indie Birth's series of podcasts here on iTunes. "You'll always have two choices. Your commitment versus your fear." That's by Sammy Davis Junior. And Maryn here today as usual with a really fun topic, I think. The honest truth about freebirth. Super excited to dive into this today because I agree with this quote. I think when making birth choices we have so many opportunities to walk more closely with what we know is true for us. And as many of us know, there's also so many opportunities to choose in fear. And so this topic might surprise you. My thoughts might surprise you. But as always, my hope is that you come away with your own feelings, your own thoughts, and a renewed interest in seriously, seriously discerning the right path. Whatever that is for you. Many of you, I think, have heard a transition in a sense. I mean maybe it's more maturity than a transition. I'd like to think so. Of myself over these bunch of years doing this podcast. This will be—let's see—the seventh year that I've been doing *Taking Back Birth*.

And I'm not sorry about any of the cool episodes, I think, we've put out there. We hear from people all of the time. And sometimes it's really surprising what episodes stick with people. So I don't even know who they hit or necessarily why, but I know they have. And I'm so grateful for that. And along those lines, I was going to say I feel like I've just matured in that I still really, really believe in the kind of births that I'm witness to most often and that I've had myself. Just pure joy and bliss. Sometimes it's hard. But amazing, undisturbed birth. That is where my heart will absolutely always be. But yet, I feel like there's this higher calling and a really a higher vibration of truth for me which is we all have this wisdom inside of us to choose what's right for us. And actually, I've said this many times before probably in different ways. I think that because we are mammals we still have the highest chance of the best outcomes with leaving birth alone. Most definitely.

But I also know we live in a time that is hard. and our challenges with birth here, especially in western countries, is largely psychological. So it's not every woman that will have an undisturbed birth. It's not every woman and family that is really even called to that for all the variety of reasons and background and history and trauma and all of the things. So I still come back to my own simple truth, which is you know what's best for you. So that's how I'm starting this podcast. I do want to focus on freebirth. Freebirth as an individual choice, which I have done before on other podcasts. And I, myself, have had freebirths for whatever that's worth. And then I also want to talk about the movement of freebirth and what I think about that.

So part of this podcast—I mean at least a little part. Let's say here's 2% or 5%. Is that I think there's a lot of confusion in the world, and I'm going to get to that part about freebirth in particular. But there's a lot of confusion even with the work we do here at Indie Birth, work that we've been doing for a solid decade, if not more, around this topic of freebirth. So maybe you don't know because you're not so intimately involved. You're not in our school. You don't live in my local community or Margo's local community. But there's lots of confusion when we're hoping to represent something like women's choices really for whatever they choose but then also alongside independent midwifery, which we believe strongly in, and support the creation of more independent midwives all over the world. And then there's this freebirth thing that seems to hang out a lot in our little corner of the world and confuse people.

So I guess I'm here to start by saying that we are creating more midwives—and midwife is kind of a bad word or a frowned upon word or a she who shall not be named word in many places. But we're standing strongly by the fact that midwives are needed, and we're representing the kind that we truly believe in which are those that don't answer to anyone but the woman and family. And so we're not training midwives to attend freebirths. That makes no sense to me. And if it doesn't make sense to you either, then that's good. And if it doesn't make sense to you because I haven't gotten into it yet, then sorry. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. But I don't understand that. So, again, there's all kinds of choices in birth. And we're going to talk about freebirth in particular.

So the concerning part of this movement freebirth to me is like any of the dogmas out there. And there I said it. I think it's dogma. I think there's a way that it looks and it goes and it must be to receive this label or this branding or inclusion in the club of freebirth. And I don't understand how that really serves many women. Again, it might serve this one individual woman. And we'll talk a little bit about that. But as a whole, those are pretty black and white kind of beliefs. And I guess my question for people that are kind of looking into all of these labels and things—and we get lots of people sent our way for consults especially that are considering freebirth. My first question to them is, “What do you want? And how does that look?” Because this dogma of it must look a certain way. It only means a certain thing if you do it this way, and you don't do these things. How is that any different than the medicalized birth scenario many of us are not happy with? Rightfully so. And we're feeling, right? Because there is a way to do that. And not to overly confuse people, but we all have kind of the thing we stand for. And licensed midwifery is something that I see as also very confining and dogmatic.

And so, I guess, I'm looking upon all of the options and saying, “Where did this freebirth thing come from that's gotten so rigid and so wrong or right and so male? So completely a product of the patriarchy that it's ironic.” It's truly ironic to me that a woman—a movement essentially built by women that were unhappy with the dogma of one method have simply swung the pendulum to the other side. and that does concern

me as a woman because it's not all or nothing whether it's medicalized birth or freebirth. It's not black and white. And birth doesn't work that way. So maybe we'll get into some of the ironies that are actually playing out in this movement because I don't think it's a healthy thing for women. I don't think it's a healthy thing for birth culture.

And truly, honestly, I'm done having babies so I'm not personally concerned. But my daughters, my granddaughters. What is this thing that's being created? It just feels to me—and I think it's out there as evident at least to those that want to perceive it this way—that there aren't a whole lot of colors or shades to freebirth as a movement. It means one thing. And like I said, it means also that, for example, you don't receive any care from a medical person during your pregnancy. And I'll probably get into some of the definition more because even that is confusing. Like I don't consider myself a medical professional, so what on earth is all this anti everything? I don't really understand.

But anyway, whether or not I understand or not isn't really the point. I'm posing the question out there to the world as kind of like a sounding board or voice of reason or maybe I'm the voice of insanity. Who knows? But just kind of posing the opposite question to women, which is you don't have to choose the pendulum on either side necessarily. I'm interested in hearing what you actually do want. And if I'm working with someone personally, of course, working with them to create that in whatever way it looks. And obviously, full disclaimer I am a midwife, and I enjoy being a midwife. But I also do support people from afar that don't want me there. And I have current clients actually that are having repeat babies who are going to just have the birth on their own. So yay for them. I think it's a really beautiful thing for the right people. But, again, I guess it's the individual choices, which I will always respect versus this movement which has created dogma around this idea.

I have experienced what I would call our freebirths. And I guess that's kind of wandering into the definition of. So as I understand the mainstream definition to be, it's a birth where there is not anyone that sort of knows anything about birth to be present. Or maybe they are using the words medical professional. That would make more sense because certainly doulas attend freebirth which I also don't completely understand. And midwives. Midwives have different boundaries and make different choices, and I have several midwife friends who attend freebirths. And I don't really know how they do that honestly because, for me, I've always felt like I support that but from afar because if I'm there I'm a midwife. And I can't be anything but that. If I was your best friend, then I could be your best friend. But if I'm not and you've hired me, it's hard to take off that hat.

So I'm not sure that the confusion though is ultimately bad. I think we're all trying to work out what's best for us. But, again, we're stuck in this patriarchal box of needing to

put a tag on something. And it's really confusing women which, I think, is a problem. So blah, blah, blah. Back to my alleged two freebirths—and I call them that because only my husband was there with my best friend. And yes. My best friend has gone on to become a midwife. But she was not at that moment or those moments and was a very new student at best which she would certainly attest to. So those were freebirths by, I think, every working definition I've ever heard. And they were lovely. They were absolutely lovely.

And were they my best births? They were great. They were absolutely great. For me, my best births—if I could label such a thing—and by that I just meant or mean probably the ease my body had in the process. Of course, there's so many variables. But the way I was supported was amazing in my last couple of births. And for those that don't know, Margo was there. She is a midwife, so I would not use the label freebirth. But who cares? They were fantastic births. And all she did was hold a camera. They were as undisturbed, as uninterrupted as any birth could ever be. So call it whatever you want. But that's ultimately what has worked for me, and I'm going to talk more about reasons for that. But one reason I wanted to go into that I personally chose freebirth when I had my sixth son or my sixth baby rather. He was my—he's my third son. And I've talked about his birth in other podcasts. But now that it's been—let's see. He's seven and a half. So now that it's been quite some time I would acknowledge now—and I didn't see it then—I would acknowledge now that I had a degree of trauma preceding his birth. And that is one very big reason that I sought out being alone.

So I know that's not everyone's reason. There's lot of reasons people choose what they do. But I see a growing number of women and interact—I don't just see them. I'm interacting with a growing number of women who have this fantasy, this idea, this kind of like false perception of this thing called freebirth. And they're actually really traumatized. So they're traumatized from previous births, from care providers, from—yes. All the things that we are all on the same page about. Birth being abusive. Not having supportive partners. All the reasons that we can have trauma around our bodies and our babies and our births. So many women. So many.

So from that perspective, I see that people are identifying freebirth as a solution, and, perhaps, it is for some. But I don't think it's a good enough solution. I'm just going to be totally honest about that. I don't think it is. I think when you're coming from a place of trauma to choose to be alone and whatever that means exactly to you to birth isn't always the healthiest thing. But sometimes it's the necessary thing. So I lived that. I feel like I can attest to that personally. And not to rehash my whole story but it was a very traumatizing year and experience previous to his birth in my life. So I was fighting the Department of Health for a midwifery license I ultimately didn't want. I was not supported by the other midwives. And so it was my reaction versus a response. Those are two different things, I think. A reaction can often be based on trauma. But it was

my reaction to birth alone because I didn't trust anyone. I didn't want any of the midwives I had known previously in that room because I knew better. I knew too much about the kind of midwifery they believed in, and the fact that they ultimately would have chosen their licenses in the state over me.

So yeah. I think you can probably hear that this is a complex discussion that I'm very much agreeing with so many reasons that women run from obstetrics. And so many reasons they are running from midwifery as it's known in the mainstream world which is largely the licensed, regulated variety. I lived it. So I know. But I'm also just calling it out. I'm calling it out for the women that maybe feel like they're alone in this. So they're feeling this call to freebirth, but there's something off about it. It's not their heart calling them. It's fear. It's trauma. It's abuse. It's things that make women not want to have other people around. And we're mammals. That is a very normal response to trauma. So again, there is so many possibilities, but trauma as a reason for freebirth is not being talked about. And it's not up to me to tell other people's stories around that. I've heard many. But I'm telling mine because I can. And I, again, would love if it was a safe space. It's not a safe world really to talk openly on huge platforms. But making a safe space for women to say, "Yes. I understand that. I wanted to lock myself in my bedroom and have my baby not because that's what I really wanted but because I felt I had no other options, and I didn't trust anyone. And I was scared."

So let's open up about the fear. Let's open up about all of the reasons that people chose this and not just the flip side, which I think can make people feel really bad too. Just the, "Oh, I believe in birth. I believe in birth 500%. I trust birth. I'm going to have a freebirth." Yes. Individually, totally. That's some women. I mean I know some. And I love them. And it's amazing how different we are. And women that truly feel that way, totally, go for it. Why would you? Why would you hire anyone? Why would you pay someone? But I'm telling you that's the minority. It is the minority. So that is where this is all coming from.

Something else that came up for me as I was kind of, honestly and transparently, considering my own trauma is that we have a collective trauma. So I think that also explains why freebirth as a movement has grown even for people that maybe even haven't had babies yet. They feel the collective cultural trauma, which is hard to get away from. So they have heard stories or who knows what. And they're just going to do it alone. They're just going to create that safe protective space because they're scared. And they don't want someone to boss them. But is that the best we can do? I mean sometimes it is. I'm honestly admitting that. And I think for some women absolutely it's still the right choice. And it's way—quote on quote safer than them marching into a hospital. Absolutely. But can we raise the bar here, women? I guess I'm saying, "Can we raise the bar? Can we be honest about our own trauma, our own fears?" And, again, recalibrate what is right for you rather than blindly following a

movement because it absolves you of having to work out your fears. Or it makes you think there's nothing to be feared in birth. It'll all work out perfectly. Definitely not true.

So back to the definition—I don't know that I have more to say about that because I've said a lot. And I think it's still confusing. What is the definition? And do we even care? Do we need one? Do we need this label? I don't know. I honestly don't know. Like I said, I've explained my own angle on that. What I've heard. I know that I've attended births as a midwife, and I've heard those women say to other women that they had a freebirth. And I don't correct people. It's not my business. Ultimately, call your birth whatever the heck you want to call it. It's your birth. You absolutely have that privilege. But if we're trying for clarity here, it's something that's really becoming even more confusing. So if you are having no one there, then that makes sense to me. But if you're having anyone there that knows about birth, specifically beyond the doula role—whatever you're going to call them, I think doesn't really matter for the sake of clarity.

So people don't like the word midwife. Okay. Well, traditional birth attendant, birth keeper. Can they really attend freebirths? Again, the woman can say whatever she wants. But it's really hard to describe what's going on. And therefore, I think hard for new pregnant women to figure out what they want when they're hearing all this conflicting information. And certainly, we haven't even talked about the skill level of people that are there or if people care. I mean it's perfectly fine to not care. But if you do care, then it's something to consider if it's a doula versus a midwife or whatever. Even the leaders in this movement are adding confusion. Just today posting about having had a freebirth but then months ago very clearly saying it wasn't a freebirth. I mean so what are women to do with the lack of honesty? And the need to cover up why? Why do any of us need to over explain ourselves to anyone? Except that some people are very, very strongly representing something and even selling it. Like not just figuratively selling it but like literally. Literally and figuratively selling this movement when no one is clear on the definition.

So I'm not quite sure myself. I've talked myself into circles. I don't actually know what freebirth means anymore because if you said you didn't have one because you had midwives there and then later you call it one—I don't know. I don't know what to say especially—yeah. If you're in the business of it all. But the unclear definition, I think, is only part of it. The part—the other part that is hard to hear and sort of wrap any degree of my heart around is that autonomy is not to find by the label you put on your birth. It's not. And I have an entire podcast on where I believe autonomy comes from. And that is an internal process that each can work through. And what it actually looks like on the outside, you had your midwife there. Oh, it wasn't autonomy anymore? No. I mean that's so black and white. And it's so superficial, and it's actually really silly. And, again, it's very male that these characteristics make this thing. And I've heard people in the freebirth community very openly flaunt that you can't have an autonomous birth

unless it's a freebirth. Well, again, we're talking ourselves in circles because we haven't actually agreed on the meaning of freebirth. But even if we had to say you can't have autonomy in a hospital or with a midwife there, I think that's ridiculous.

I don't think it's easy for sure. And I don't think a lot of women truly actually know and are experiencing what autonomy is. So I'd rather have that conversation rather than telling people how to order up their autonomy through a freebirth. It's just not true. And, again, so many stories of people that didn't experience that. Didn't have autonomy to start and didn't have autonomy to finish because they hadn't done that part of the work. So is the label more important than the actual experience? I don't know. I don't think so myself, but you have your own thoughts about it.

There's also this reason—yes, it's trauma essentially but also fear that someone will interrupt their birth, interrupt their process. And, man, I get that. Like there is great science to support undisturbed birth, which is what we love teaching and what we love supporting. But being overly fearful about someone doing something is an interesting concept because it seems like so much of that is a discussion about the birth when really that's a discussion for life. How do we claim autonomy in our lives? And if we're working through our pregnancy even with someone, wouldn't it be natural that if we really had ideas about undisturbed birth that we would communicate them? And so have great discussions about really creating what we want rather than just opting out of all the anti everythings that we don't like.

Also birth has risks. So I'm not going to be one of those people because I don't like them either. That wants to talk about all the terrible things that can happen, that do happen, that have happened at freebirths because the truth is they happen everywhere. No one is immune to death. No provider. No location. Honestly, no one is and just expose yourself, if you dare, to women that have lost. And you'll learn very quickly that we can't say any which thing. There is no one, ultimately, that's exempt from death. So talking more—not right now because I've talked a lot. But in the future, in the work we have done, in the work we will do, and all of the things out there that you all have to offer, more of this conversation around death and blame and how we all deal with that because there certainly is this idea, I think, by those that hold freebirth at its highest—and, again, as a movement, that bad things don't happen. And that's absolutely not true. Persecution, prosecution, death, blame. It all happens. Even in freebirth.

So if you didn't know that, now you do. But that's no different. That's honestly no different than anything else. And it doesn't matter, again, where you're choosing to birth. Those are the realities we all need to accept as pregnant women. There certainly are actual things that can come up in freebirths that absolutely cannot be dealt with by the mother herself. And I know that because I have prepared for my own freebirths, and I can't lie. And I won't lie and say that I really know what it's like to be a woman in her

pregnancy planning for a freebirth without knowledge. And that might sound obnoxious, but that's just the truth. I've been studying birth for 15 years. So I didn't go into my freebirths knowing nothing. And in some ways, I wish I could have. And I'm going to talk about that in a minute. But I think knowing nothing and just being in a place of trust is certainly valid and a beautiful way that works for some people. But that wasn't where I was at in my life.

So knowing the sort of things that could happen that I wouldn't be able to deal with were humbling. And I still chose freebirth. So that's not even a plug to dissuade people. But let's be honest here. There's so much out there nowadays that we have at our fingertips. Something like breech birth, which I am so passionate about and love and always learning more, et cetera, et cetera—that has become more mainstream, right? So on Instagram, et cetera, you can see so many videos and photos. And so something like that, sure. I mean if you're still called to freebirth after knowing your baby is breech which would be part of the decision making if you even knew that that was going on because you might not if you're not really consulting with anyone. But something like that is huge. So I hear women talk about situations like this in the freebirth community so flippantly. Like, "Oh, well, of course, I would have a breech baby by myself." It's like no. Don't phrase it like that. Sure. Do it if that's right for you. But don't put it out there as birth has no risks because something like that might really be the wrong choice, might really be not a smart choice for someone. If you don't know anything about breech birth and you have a breech baby hanging half out of you, there's not going to be a ton that you might be able to do for yourself.

So that's just reality. That's absolutely just reality. And I think it's totally naïve to act like everything will always be perfect. It's not true. So I want to talk for a minute just about what I see as kind of the angles that people might solidly choose a freebirth from. And, again, I'm not really judging how you do or how you don't. But I don't hear these discussions happening at all. So here I am. One way would be to, yes, get solidly educated about birth. And truthfully, I don't know how that's possible. Like I'm posing that, but unless you have a decade or more to study then I don't really think you can digest the education of a midwife or—heck, of an obstetrician in a 7 or 8-month period. And then while also honoring the hormones of an undisturbed labor be able to access your rational brain to even act in such a way that you would be helpful to yourself.

So I guess I'm biased. I don't really think that's the way to go about planning for a freebirth, if you're going to. And people ask us all the time. So, again, why I'm here blabbing today. Yeah. We get asked—excuse me—exactly that. "So I'm planning a freebirth. And how do I learn about all the things that I need to know?" And I don't even know what to say sometimes because—yeah. As I just shared, I think that's really not possible. And also naïve and a little bit arrogant to assume that you could know all the things because, I mean, we never know all the things, number one. And just interesting

that, again, it's so male. So enough about that. I think the other angle is, to me, more feminine. And I guess, to me, makes the most sense even though it's not an angle I really had the privilege of trying out too much although my last birth was pretty blissful and I really wasn't in my head at all. So maybe I do know. But so this other angle is just trusting. Be one of the trust birth people because you have to be. Because you can get yourself into that space in all the ways emotionally, spiritually, mentally.

And I'm not going to go into what I think that entails because I think that entails a shitload of internal work. Not taking a course and certainly not just reading a book on how to handle a shoulder dystocia. I think it's the harder, honestly, of the two options. And I already said that I didn't think the first option was even that easy because you'd need a decade to study. So I think the second option is harder for some but also totally fluid and organic and beautiful for other women. And I think that's great. So don't learn. Just listen to your body. Listen to your baby. Get that communication going really well and trust and see it and know that it will be what you want it to be.

Because really, what are the other options? Either you disaster prepare, which I get some people are more type A, so to speak. But, again, I don't see how that really serves you as the birthing woman to be in that mental space. But then people have trouble getting totally on the trust train, which I also really understand. Because, again, I think birth is amazing and works—I say works 99% of the time. And I think that's true. That's true to what I've seen and experienced, but there's still that other 1%. And there's still the fact that birth is respected. It's not ultimately trusted beyond your own body, your own baby. It's like the weather. So I've kind of outlined those two opportunities. Kind of funny that I did that because it seems very black or white, right? It's either trust or learn.

But no. That's my short version because otherwise this podcast would be hours and hours long. I'm sure there are other ways to go about it, and there's different variations and colors. And maybe if someone is really hyper focused on hemorrhage, for example, maybe it does pay to study up on that and learn about how a placenta is released and birthed. There certainly, I think, is so much to learn, so much wonderful wisdom and knowledge out there in the world. So I'm actually not discouraging people from learning. But to me, again, it's more that fear perspective. That people are looking to hurry up. Hurry up and digest the novel of birth so they can have this freebirth they think they want or need. And I think there's just so much more to it as I am explaining.

So here's one last topic that came up for me the last time that I was discussing freebirth with a potential freebirth person. This idea, again, that it's very anti. It's very anti doctor. Anti midwife. Anti intervention. Just be home alone even though, as I said, many people even running this movement haven't had births like that. So that's very curious to me. But anyhow, why is it so fearful? Why is it so victimized essentially?

And I think that comes back to the trauma, so I'm not going to go there again. But what if? What if there is this other perspective that, to me at least—you can disagree—feels open and light and like this higher vibration of asking for the support you need. And that doesn't matter to me who that is. Maybe it's a midwife. Uh oh. It's not freebirth. No. Anyway, anyone you want because you want to be witnessed. I would love to talk about that more and maybe that's another podcast someday.

I realized with my last couple of births that I have already described and really the focus on the kind of support that I truly desired in my heart and finally found a place for after birthing many babies was in being witnessed. So I wasn't looking for Margo to do anything, but I also wasn't afraid she would. But I also was fine if she did if I really needed it. It was the most organic, beautiful combination of support without her needing something from me which, I agree, is not a great dynamic for a pregnant woman to have especially in labor. But what about this needs to be witnessed? And why is it not okay to ask for what we want? And to not care what it's called and to not have to look a certain way or define it or have the world know that we didn't have a midwife there. We did it alone. Yes. I mean there's so much excitement in just birthing a baby. Totally. Shout it from the rooftops when you birth your baby.

But don't feel like it needs to be this dogmatic method, for lack of a better word. And don't shortchange yourself. Don't compromise on what you actually want. And if being witnessed and, traditionally, this is by another woman, but I suppose it could be by anyone. Traditionally being witnessed by another woman, to me, is one of the shining moments, shining stars. It's part of the mystery of birth somehow is wrapped up in the witness. So it's not about the witness. It's about the birthing woman. But her witness is so important to her. And maybe that witness takes photos. And maybe that witness rarely does get involved in the birth in some way but very rarely anyway. So what are we afraid of? What are we afraid of? Why the need to block everything out when being witnessed is something that many women are called to do for other women? And many birthing women really in their hearts really, truly in their hearts would love a witness.

So that's what I hear all the time honestly. I definitely shared my own experience because I don't want to speak for anyone. But yet, there are so many women that come our way that are disillusioned. They're disillusioned with this medicalized system of birth obviously. But they're also disillusioned with this freebirth mentality and movement because it's not honest. It's not honest for a lot of women. And it's painting the real picture of what women want. And it's not ultimately serving women in the way they want to be served. So that's my little sermon today. And ultimately, of course, everyone, hopefully, has the privilege to investigate these choices and make them for themselves. And, again, I know that that's naive, and there are many women out there that truly don't feel they have a choice. And freebirth seems like that—what's the analogy? Kind of that shiny thing with all the shiny paper. And it's like, "Oh my god. I

found it. That's what I want." But what you really want is to feel brave and to be witnessed perhaps. And all the other stuff kind of falls away. And what everyone else is doing and saying and not being truthful about doesn't even matter anymore.

So that's my hope. That everyone goes within regardless of what they think are there options on the outside. Go within. Weigh your fears. Assess your trauma. Dream into what would feel so great for you if you could have it. Maybe you'll find it. Maybe you won't. Practice trusting yourself. Recognize that no one has the answers for you. There is not a birth story you can hear. There is not a podcast you can listen to—and I've said this many times. Even mine. Even those of you that really resonate with this or parts of it, it's just my own truth. And it's my own, I think, wisdom as someone that's had a lot of experience and is able to also back up and see the big picture of where things might be headed.

And really wanting women to find their center again. Don't sell out. Don't sell it out to the freebirth people. Don't sell it out to the doctors. Ultimately, it's not even an us against them. It's you. It's you, you, you in your body, in your soul, in your truth that you will find the way. So thanks for listening. And as always, check out indiebirth.org. We'd love a review on iTunes, if you'd be so kind. It's been a long time since I've said that. And I—if you haven't noticed over 7 years—have never once played you people an ad. I've never once done that because I don't like it. I don't think it's the way I want my podcast to be. So at the very least, if you appreciate these podcasts over the years, we'd love a nice review. That would be so super helpful. And indiebirthmidwiferyschool.org is currently accepting applications for our class of 2020.

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