Three women climbed down the rocky, steep hillside, one pregnant and two with multiple children resting on their hip or clutching onto them with little hands. They watched carefully where their feet landed, testing rocks with the weight of one foot before taking each step. These women and their families lived up above the metropolitan city of Lima in “Pubelos Jovenes” consisting of small shacks on borrowed land with no water, electricity, or paved roads. It was here in Lima, interning for a medical support NGO, MEDLIFE, in the summer after my first year of college, that I became intrigued by the unique strength of women and their role as mothers.

When I returned to school in the fall I started interning for Coastal Connections, a program run through the case-management department of the hospital nearby. Coastal helps connect uninsured patients to community agencies and resources to assist with a variety of issues affecting their health. The fascination I had developed in Lima continued, and I began to focus on cases of pregnant patients and new mothers, and I also proposed, researched, and compiled a module on resources specific to mothers in the Charleston area. Through this work I saw that the issues these women were dealing with were different from those I saw with MEDLIFE’s patients, but the overall strength I saw was intrinsic to mothers in both places.

With an eye towards looking for the holistic picture of issues mothers faced in my community, I spent spring semester of my junior year completing an independent study on the history of childbirth in the United States. I gathered all the information I could about the medicalization of childbirth, the disappearance of traditional midwifery, and the lack of an evidence base for many modern birth interventions. Through this research, I learned about the power and support we fail to give mothers during their birth experience, a failure that I believe is interconnected with many of the issues new mothers face. My independent study morphed into my current, year-long senior thesis comparing modern birth across cultures with a focus on their contrasts to the US system. Mexico has become a key comparative model in that research.

As a pre-medical student, scientific research, combined with the knowledge embedded in midwife culture, is at the heart of how I see positive changes affecting our current birth model. I have had the opportunity to be involved in research at the Medical University of South Carolina looking into biomarkers for perinatal anxiety and depression to proactively treat emotional disability in new mothers. I also have been involved in the Women’s Health Research Team at my college, working on a study in conjunction with a freestanding midwifery-led birth center. We analyzed the effectiveness of castor oil, a natural alternative to Pitocin that helps prevent the cascade of interventions common to hospital birth in which Pitocin plays a major role. Through these experiences, I have focused on ways in which birth in the United States can become more supportive and empowering to women as a whole person, rather than just a set of symptoms.

While engaging in these experiences, I pursued an art history major in order to learn more about the experience of other cultures. Art history has taught me to always look for the larger story, the context and community in which the final artworks emerge. This attention to human detail influences my work in women’s health, as well. Just as a story lay beneath every painting, every mother lived with a complicated tangle of opportunities and constraints on her and her child’s health. It’s that initial wonder I held for the story of the women in Peru, my concern at the way we treat mothers in my own country, and an optimism for the possibilities of scientific, evidence-based change that drives me to continue to learn as much as I can about reproductive healthcare. I believe birth is a women’s greatest strength that unites new and experienced mothers around the world, from the hillsides of Lima to my neighborhood in Charleston, and I hope to educate and support communities of women to feel empowered to tap into this strength.