

Midwifery is a Calling: How Birthwise Students Found Their Place



Second year student Gayle Eckey performs a newborn exam on baby Nora.

Sleepless nights, home visits, blood-splattered clothing – midwifery is messy business. As midwife Diana Janopaul puts it, every beautiful birth comes after hours of “back-rubbing, poop-wiping, cervix-checking, amniotic fluid-splashing labor.”

For most people, there are plenty of other, less messy career paths to choose from. For a dedicated few, however, **midwifery is the only path** for them. Women and men from every walk of life are wholeheartedly called to birthwork and, en route, to Birthwise.

Hailing from across the United States and Canada, as well as from Columbia, Switzerland, Germany, and Israel, Birthwise's diverse group of midwives and future midwives discovered their calling in a hundred different ways.

Some fell naturally into birthwork when their own children were born. Working with midwives before, during, and after their labors intimately acquainted them with the ins and outs of natural birth. They used this initiation to begin aiding other women going through the same experience.

Second year student Gayle Eckey gave birth to three children before enrolling at Birthwise. For Gayle, the transition from woman to mother to midwife came naturally. It was a life progression, rather than a single aha moment, that led her to pursue midwifery.

“Because I know how transforming, pure, and empowering birth can be, I feel called to hold that space for others,” she says. “My desire for formal midwifery education grew over those years. The more ingrained I became in birthwork, the greater my desire became, until I created my reality by becoming a Birthwise student.”

First year student and mother of four Madrona Wienges discovered midwifery while pregnant with her first child. Madrona's birthworker was a third generation midwife in British Columbia who "gracefully carried on the midwifery lineage passed down from her mother and grandmother."

"Her trust in birth as a natural, empowering journey was contagious," recalls Madrona, "She sat with me, listened to my story. **She inspired me to meet my fears and connect with my growing baby through caring for my body, mind, and spirit.**"

After her delivery, a friend asked Madrona to attend the homebirth of her child. The friend's labor progressed quickly. The midwife didn't make it to the birth in time, but Madrona did. The experience of being – accidentally – the primary caregiver during this precipitous labor changed her life.

"At the time I was not yet familiar with doula work, but I did begin to be asked by friends to come to their home births. I was deeply honored and moved by each experience. It became clear through these births, and that which evolved through the relationships to these families, that I would continue on this path of birthwork."

Historically – as was the case with Gayle and Madrona – women gave birth before becoming birthworkers in their communities. Firsthand experience with birth is, however, no longer necessary to be a good

midwife. Many Birthwise students are innately drawn to the process of natural birth without having given birth themselves.

“In my earliest memories, I was enamored by the female being,” recalls Gayle, “**The curves, the ability to create and to nourish – these were things that were intertwined in my life from the beginning.**”

Signs can also come from the most unexpected places. Birthwise teacher Robin Illian ('05) drove cross-country from California to Maine before the start of her first semester as a student at Birthwise. Crossing the Maine border the night before her first day of school, she encountered a moose standing in the middle of the road.

The moose took a look at her car and began to trot in the same direction. For a few miles it trotted in front of the car in the middle of the road, looking back every so often as if to make sure she was following. Robin took this extraordinary experience as a sign that she was on the right path with this whole midwifery thing.

Positive birth experiences, mentor midwives, respect for the female being, and a moose that turned out to be very right – students are called to midwifery separately, but pursue it together at Birthwise.

“Our students come to midwifery from many paths, but they all share a desire to make pregnancy and birth a positive, empowering and safe

experience for families— and that takes passion and commitment,” says Birthwise academic director Heidi Fillmore.

A sense of purpose helps women and men succeed at and beyond Birthwise. “Becoming a midwife takes study, experience, sacrifice and hard work,” Heidi notes. “Those who know deeply that this is the work they are meant to do are able to find the resources, personal or otherwise, for this journey.”

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