

Growing up in Canada, I knew very little about midwives. At that time, doctors looked after women while they were pregnant, nurses cared for them in labour, doctors delivered the babies and most people thought that was how it had to be done. In fact it was illegal to have anyone but a doctor deliver a baby then. I was vaguely aware that midwives existed, but only as a small group in Canada, which I knew little about. My impression of them, taken mainly from stories, was of “witchy wise-women” or “new-age earth mother hippies” – neither of which I really saw myself as.

That all changed when I moved to the UK in 1998. While working as a nurse in London (which I loved) I met some student midwives. Hearing about their experiences, I instinctively knew it was what I wanted to do too. I’d always been fascinated by pregnancy and childbirth and thought I’d eventually work in “maternity nursing”. Had I grown up in the UK, where midwives are the norm, I’m certain I would have gone straight into midwifery from high school.

In 2000, I enrolled on a midwifery degree programme. The first birth I attended was in the home of an incredibly chilled out Dutch couple. I don’t think I appreciated at the time how lucky I was to have such an easy introduction to childbirth, where everything went to plan by candlelight and the soundtrack of their favourite music.

Over the years I attended many more births, in all kinds of places. I’ve caught babies in cars, in baths, on floors, on yoga balls and even in the hospital car park (not because I’m a terrible midwife I might add – these things happen more than you might think!). One year a woman even gave birth under the Christmas tree in the hospital lobby.

No two births are ever the same but they’re always precious, especially when the outcome is a sad one. Being a midwife sometimes involves loss and I remember every one of those mothers and babies I met whose stay in the world was far too brief.

I’ve also worked with plenty of midwives throughout the years and they’re a diverse bunch. I’m pleased to say this does include some “witchy wise-women” and “new-age hippies”, who I have more in common with than I would have thought. My career has taken some unpredictable twists and turns, moving from the front lines of the labour ward into research and public health, but I’m still a midwife, and I consider myself very lucky to be one.

**By Layla Lavalley, Midwife**