

**Chelsey Foster**  
**Reproductive Rights Activist Services Corps 2017 Internship Report**  
**The Doula Project**

This summer, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime: to intern with the Doula Project in New York City. The Doula Project is a nonprofit organization that provides free compassionate care and doula services to people across the spectrum of pregnancy. Originally called the Abortion Doula Project, the project really is a unique organization, being at the forefront of abortion doula work in the United States. After a couple of years, the name changed to the Doula Project to more accurately represent the doula services they provide, which includes support for abortions, miscarriages, births, post-partum periods, and even IUDs. As stated on their website, the Doula Project's vision is "to create a society in which all pregnant people have access to the care and support they need during their pregnancies and the ability to make healthy decisions for themselves, whether they face birth, miscarriage, stillbirth, fetal anomaly, or abortion." It has truly been an honor to be a vital component of their organization this summer, and to have helped their mission come to fruition.

My main task as a Doula Project intern included being part of their volunteer rotation at Planned Parenthood clinics and public hospitals around NYC. It took a while to get cleared and trained to work at the different locations, but once I had gotten cleared, I had no problem transitioning to being on the schedule and being put into rotation. My time was equally divided between working on the labor and delivery floor as a birth doula, and working at Planned Parenthood clinics as an abortion doula. The Doula Project trained me to be an abortion doula, but I had gotten birth trained a few months prior to starting my internship so that I could work the twelve hour labor and delivery shifts. It was very exciting being on the labor and delivery floor at the hospital. It was a fast paced, exciting, and sometimes nerve-wracking floor to

experience. I worked at minimum twelve hour shifts, and had to be ready to support moms at 8:30am sharp. I found it to be most difficult when I would support a mom who had already gone through majority of her laboring experience without me, and I had to try to play catch up with her and her loved ones. When I could support a mom early or midway through labor until she had given birth, there was plenty of opportunity to get to know each other and establish a relationship that included trust and some comfortability throughout that emotional journey. I felt that the best way to provide service to the mom was to have the mom be comfortable with me. I also thought it was important to establish familiarity because there were always so many different doctors and nurses coming in and out of the mom's laboring room. Sometimes, this made moms uncomfortable or frustrated during intense contractions and vaginal exams. When moms trusted me, I could better soothe them, and assure them that everything was okay. This is just one of the important tips I picked up about being a birth doula, but there were many more.

The labor and delivery floor is where I think I grew the most. I learned a lot about childbirth, culture, and healthcare in general. As an aspiring OB-GYN, it was important for me to gain that exposure, and to understand the wide spectrum of care. Although the care that I provided was strictly emotional and physical, I was still a valued member of the team that included nurses, doctors, anesthesiologists, etc.. I admired them greatly because they all worked coherently and cohesively to ensure the safety of mom and baby while trying their best to follow mom's birth plan. I've seen OB-GYNs wait until the very last minute, after pushing for a little over an hour, to request a C-section because the baby was in distress. I've seen doctors wait an hour to vaginally examine a patient who did not want an exam until her mother had arrived. I've seen nurses work with moms birthing naturally to limit the amount of fetal monitoring to only what was necessary, per mom's request. The labor and delivery floor that I worked on was great

at listening to their birthing patients and making sure that they had the autonomy they requested. It has been a privilege to witness some of the issues of reproductive justice in healthcare being addressed and disassembled in a public hospital, something that I aspire to do when I become an OB-GYN. It is something that I worry about constantly because of the medicalization of childbirth in the United States. I have hope that childbirth will return to its universally healthy and empowering state in the coming years, and I am now more confident than ever in my role to assist in that process.

My experience at Planned Parenthood was also very pleasant, and although I was doing abortion doula work, the support looked very similar. I would get to know patients, provide them with information, comfort them, and soothe them before, during, and after a procedure. Initially, it was difficult for me because I subconsciously made many assumptions. On my first day at Planned Parenthood, I supported seven patients, and all of them had cried at the end of their procedures. Instead of being practical and assessing the situation, I instantly assumed that the patients were crying because they were sad. No other reason occurred to me until I had a patient say to me “Woah, that was so painful.” I acquired a lot of knowledge about the procedure, enough to know that the cramping becomes the most intense towards the very end. Even with that knowledge, I proceeded to create my own narratives. While empathy is an important component in the work that’s done through the Doula Project, I realized that I cannot push narratives onto people. While it was not my intention to do so, I realized that I had been subconsciously engaging in that kind of thinking all day, which caused me to carry around a lot of pain myself. I think that as an English major, empathy flowed naturally for me. I’ve had to put myself in a lot of characters’ shoes in the past couple of years, and experience their thoughts and assess their feelings. My empathetic nature made me better suited to support different people

with different experiences, but it also caused me to feel weighed down with emotions on some days. It is for this reason that self-care is so important while interning with the Doula Project. I would strongly suggest taking some time to enjoy the summer and the city. I had a great summer in NYC going to concerts, shows, exploring the city, and eating lots of food! As doulas, we're doing a disservice to all those we support if we don't take time out to make sure that we are also taken care of emotionally. My highlights were always when patients would leave and tell me how much of a difference I made to them and how glad they were to have had my support.

Outside of clinical work, my work with the Doula Project extended to private clients, fundraising events, and Leadership Circle meetings. I met with a private birthing client this summer to draft a birth plan and provide her with free childbirth education resources. I also served as a resource to her by explaining to her what she could expect as her labor progressed, comfort measures and positions she could get into with the help of her partner if either myself or my partner was not around, etc.. I had been on call for her birth for a number of weeks, but at the last minute she had to be induced, and because of the hospital's strict guest limit, I could not support her during her labor. It was very unfortunate, especially because I had spent so much time getting to know her and getting ready for her labor, but those types of things happen. As an intern who was also birth trained, I was on-call as back-up for more births over the summer, but was never actually called in.

We also held a fundraising event called Doulaoke this summer. I was volunteered to help set up and collect money. Doulaoke was one of the few events that we held that allowed me to meet other volunteers and supporters of the organization. I met a few of the midwives, doulas, and founders of the Doula Project. It truly was a great night.

Lastly, I attended Leadership Circle meetings. The Leadership Circle is a small group of full-spectrum doulas who head different parts of the organization. At those meetings, myself and the other interns would be asked to sit in and take notes. It provided me with a lot of insight into what it takes to run a nonprofit organization, and some of the frustrations that can arise from it.

I learned a lot about myself this summer, but mainly that I could do this work forever — and that I truly want to do this work forever. Although it is not realistic for an OB-GYN to be with one single patient throughout their labor, an OB-GYN should be highly skilled in providing compassionate care and emotional and physical support to all patients, regardless of socio-economic status, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.. These skills make a difference in people's birthing experiences, and can even affect the health of mom and baby. Access to quality care should not be a luxury in public hospitals but a requirement, and I've seen firsthand the difference that it can make.

### Recommendations for Future Interns

I think it may be useful to know that all of my expectations were met for this internship! Take advantage of all the great resources that are available to you, especially if you are pre-med or pre-health, or exploring those options. I was surrounded by so many health experts with a passion for reproductive justice, and they always had something wise to say. I was constantly influenced by the depth of their characters. In addition to taking advantage of your resources, I highly recommend getting copies of all of your health records right before you start your internship. If you're not sure what this means or what it consists of, ask your supervisor as early as possible — they should be able to assist you. Good luck, and have fun!