I became a global maternal health advocate the day that I became a mother almost 10 years ago. This wasn’t because I joined the sisterhood of motherhood that is becoming a mother. It is because I survived a near-death experience.

After I survived giving birth to my daughter, Grace, I learned that at that time, every year, half a million plus women were dying due to delivery complications. The statistic that really woke me up, though, was the fact that 90% of those deaths were preventable. If 90% can be saved through simple solutions that we have already identified, I realized there was something I could do to help.

But it really was when I was pregnant with my second child and traveling in El Salvador, where my mother was born, that I had an “a-ha” moment. I was visiting a small community a couple of hours outside of the capital city. I realized that if I had had my childbirth complication there, I would not have survived.

BECOMING PART OF THE SOLUTION
I came home to New York and delivered my son without complications, then committed myself to doing all that I can to raise awareness about unnecessary maternal deaths and to doing something to be part the solution. In 2008, I applied to the Columbia School of Public Health and started a documentary film. I traveled for two years to document stories of women living in vulnerable situations at the ends of their pregnancies to show the barriers to good healthcare that they experience—not just in countries like Bangladesh, Tanzania and Guatemala, but also here in the United States.

When I completed the film in 2010, I knew the film alone might help wake people up by showing them the realities behind the statistics: the real people, their faces, their stories.

I also felt that more was required. So I started Every Mother Counts as an advocacy mobilization campaign, using the film and my public platform to help us all achieve Millennium Development Goal number five, which is to reduce maternal mortality three-quarters by 2015.

A key solution to helping us achieve the Millennium Development Goals is universal access to comprehensive reproductive health services: contraception and education. I believe the role of Every Mother Counts, and my role as an individual who has experienced a complication, is to help raise awareness about these issues and solutions.

I work with both large and small organizations, mainly by inviting the public to participate in this discourse, because I believe that—working together—we can make pregnancy and childbirth safer for all moms.