For years, I had envisioned myself solely as a wildlife research veterinarian who would change public policy in favor of conservation and biodiversity. As a backpacker, SCUBA diver, rock climber, and eco-tourist, I was determined to protect the animals that called me to the outdoors. This passion led me to start a marine animal conservation club, volunteer in wildlife rehabilitation centers, intern at the Oakland Zoo, travel to the Galapagos, and assist with research on the human-wildlife interface. Knowing I could achieve the most thorough understanding of the animal body by studying veterinary medicine, I was sure I wanted to be a veterinary scientist improving the state of wild animal populations through research and education, and of course, field work. Though initially my adventurous nature limited me to believe I would never want to “be stuck in a clinic” all day, when I began working in a small animal clinic I realized the clinical aspect of veterinary medicine actually held the adventure I sought—sparked by the splenectomy of a giant Bernese mountain dog called “Sam”.

The opening in Sam’s abdomen steamed quietly as Dr. Patton gasped and swore under her breath, meeting the cause of Sam’s plummeting weight over the past few weeks. My eyes widened in a mixed state of horror and fascination as Dr. Patton extracted a grossly lumpy, purplish organ larger than a T-bone steak from Sam’s body. She promptly cut it out and dropped into my hands the cancerous spleen that had been unfairly drawing life away from the young dog. Though excited and overwhelmed, as this was the most spectacular surgery I had seen at the time, I maintained a calm head; my training as a SCUBA diver reflected in my controlled disposition.

I developed other traits from my outdoor adventures that translate over to veterinary medicine. I am enthusiastic to learn new skills and become familiar with my gear to have the preparation and confidence to handle any emergency situation should one arise. For the same reason, I am constantly seeking familiarity with the tools of veterinary medicine, cleaning instruments to get a better look at the different ridges in carmalts and hemostats. As rock climbing guide for UC Davis Outdoor Adventures, I am accustomed to teamwork, leading groups with a co-guide to introduce participants to climbing. My eyes are oriented to detail—I look for weak spots in rope, unsecure pieces of rock, and incorrectly tied knots, for these could have serious consequences. I attribute these traits to why I was promoted to pre-operative procedures and surgeon’s assistant after one volunteer shift at Fix Our Ferals, a cat spay/neuter clinic, when new volunteers are usually placed in post-operative care.

Before Sam, I was involved in clinical rehabilitation of injured waterfowl at International Bird Rescue. When I noticed that so many birds presented injuries directly resulting from human activity, I was struck with a need to find out how it this human-wildlife conflict could be prevented, which supported my interest in wildlife research. Transferring from community college to UC Davis as a Regents Scholar, the novelty of the research university drew me galloping towards research internships to feed my interest in the human-wildlife interface. I did an aquatic toxicology internship my first quarter, and a coyote genetics internship the next. Though the research was intellectually stimulating, I tremendously missed the direct contact and hands-on nature of wildlife rehabilitation.

I am driven by a relentless need to discover, and Sam’s splenectomy helped me realize that the clinical aspect of veterinary medicine was the best outlet for me—I could only peer so close to see what Dr. Patton called “the omentum”, limited by the sterile field. I feel an unshakable desire to be scrubbed in and gowned up; to acquire an intimate knowledge of the physiological cogs and wheels that make animals tick; to become fluent with medical tools and procedures that will allow me to provide the kind of care that Dr. Patton provided for Sam. I know my skills as a veterinary assistant are invariably helpful, but I also want to be able to pinpoint and develop solutions to the issues that compromise an animal’s health and well-being. My experiences, intrinsic hands-on nature, and ability to think clearly and creatively even under duress (derived from my outdoor recreation) give me the confidence that I can pursue veterinary medicine to its deepest depths.