Dr. Deborah Weiss ‘75 Sturtevant of the Department of Social Work at Hope College has a unique approach as both a mentor and a scholar. She is passionate about helping children and has dedicated her career to finding ways to improve child welfare internationally. Her research focuses on helping developing nations establish their own systems for caring for children, which she sees as crucial for long-term success. She believes that by teaching children how to care for themselves, we can help break the cycle of poverty and abuse.

Dr. Weiss earned her social work degree in only three years, a testament to her determination and drive. She went to a leadership conference for high school students in India and thought, “I want to go to this college.” She was so inspired by the possibilities that she applied to Hope and was accepted. The first time she came on campus, she was blown away by the beauty and the potential of the place called Hope that she began to imagine herself particularly moved to address, leading her to pursue a career in social work.

Her research focuses on child welfare non-governmental organizations working in Romania. In the coming year, she will be in Central America and Africa, both to learn more about the needs involved and to work with organizations and individuals there to help meet them. “For me, the measure of civil society is how we care for kids,” Dr. Weiss said. “Children must endure the fallout of wars, famines, AIDS, and poverty, and it’s a compounding problem internationally.”

“My passion in my career is to find ways to work with both our own country and other countries to improve conditions for children,” she said. “I’m trying to work with other countries to think about how they develop child welfare systems. We take for granted in our society the importance of child development, attachment, family systems, nutrition and health care, and also that we have systems like foster care, adoption and social services, but it’s not so in some other countries in the world.”

Hope students play an essential role as collaborators in her projects and, crucially, learn vital skills as they prepare for their own careers. It’s activity for which they have even earned acclaim while at Hope, such as selection for participation in National Council on Undergraduate Research conferences and the Council on Undergraduate Research’s “Posters on the Hill” event in Washington, D.C.

“I really support the concept of working with undergraduate students in the research process. They realize so much more what the career possibilities are when they can connect with faculty in that way.”

Dr. Deborah Weiss ’75 Sturtevant’s research program, which focuses on helping developing nations establish their own systems for caring for children, has been a catalyst for undergraduate research. Students have the opportunity to work with Hope students on developing nations and contribute to the research process.

“Along all students have been included in my research,” Dr. Weiss said. “I really support the concept of working with undergraduate students in the research process. They realize so much more what the career possibilities are when they can connect with faculty in that way.”

For the conference in China, Kelly not only helped put together the presentations in advance but led the section on child abuse and neglect, took the notes and wrote the follow-up report. In addition, Dr. Sturtevant noted, Kelly contributed valuable perspective through having lived in China since she was 14, providing understanding of the culture as they sought to work with—and not simply speak at—those attending.

“That was really a highlight in my life,” she said. “I so admired seeing them express their faith in that way—it wasn’t just about building and using career skills for them. I think that for each of us that go to Hope, that foundation of faith and values are part of what we bring to the career experiences that we have in the world.”

Correspondingly, even as she looks abroad through her research she is also interested in developing more opportunities for students to explore their discipline and career paths. “Regardless of what job that people have in life, they can make a contribution through service and philanthropy in the future,” Dr. Weiss said. “Part of the inspiration is to stretch people to achieve their dreams and to reach higher and to realize that they can make a difference in the world whatever their position in life.”