



Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps Intern Report

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Through the Civil Liberties and Public Policy's RRASC Internship Program, I had the opportunity to spend the summer of 2006 working as an intern at the Pro-Choice Public Education Project. The Pro-Choice Public Education Project, or PEP, is a Manhattan based organization dedicated to raising the voices of groups of women who have not traditionally been included in the reproductive rights movement. As a person with limited prior knowledge of issues relating to reproduction, this summer served as a truly incredible learning experience.

I began my position with PEP in early June as a full time intern. Before starting my internship I spoke with PEP's Program Manager, Eshanda Fennell, to establish a work schedule. In the past the RRASC grant recipients that had been assigned to work with PEP had been full time, as per the organization's request. I however, had been looking for a part time position when I originally applied for the RRASC grant, so that I could spend time with my family and fulfill a previous commitment to a weekend job. PEP was very understanding and together Eshanda and I arranged a schedule in which both of needs would be met. Rather than coming in for eight hour days, five days a week, I would work longer hours on Monday through Thursday and then have Fridays off. We agreed that if that schedule left any tasks to be completed I could also work from home on Fridays.

During the workweek I arranged to live with a group of friends in the Bronx. On Thursday evenings and Monday mornings I commuted into Manhattan from my parents' or boyfriends' homes in Dutchess County. Traveling from either point of origin to PEP's office

took about the same amount of time from door to door. However commuting from the Bronx was significantly less expensive. It also allowed me to get a better sense of New York City, in particular the Bronx.

PEP has four employees with whom I worked with on various projects during my time there. Aimee Thorne-Thomsen serves as PEP's Executive Director, Eshanda Fennell is the Program Manager, Meredith Esser is in charge of Leadership Development and Mary Mahoney works as the Development Associate and Office Manager. All four women were wonderful to work with. From the moment I stepped foot in the office on my first morning to find smiling faces, flowers and a big "Welcome Ellie" sign, I felt comfortable at PEP. I was given a desk and nook, which I was encouraged to decorate and make my own. Food was ordered in at lunch and we all ate together and got to know each other. I was even given a tour of the neighborhood around the office so that I would know my way to subway stops and places where I could buy lunch. Also waiting for me was an intern binder that had been compiled as a reference. In the binder were many things I might need to know throughout the summer, all organized in a clear and helpful, manner. I referred to that binder regularly when I needed to know about a person or event involved in the Reproductive Rights Movement, or when I was wondering which staff member I should go to with a certain question (descriptions of everyone's roles were provided), or a number of many other things. These gestures sent me a clear message that PEP was happy and prepared to have a visiting intern with them. This inclusive attitude extended beyond the first day; I was always invited to participate in meetings, and my input seemed welcome in spite of the temporary nature of my position and my youth. I saw this as a way in which PEP lived out its own motto of hearing the voices of young women who may not be experts in the movement, but whose insights and experience can be helpful.

In the first weeks of my internship I worked almost exclusively with Eshanda Fennell on a handful of projects. In her own exploring Eshanda had found that there was no comprehensive timeline of the Reproductive Rights Movement, especially one that included

perspectives from women of color. I began searching for and compiling events in mainstream Reproductive Rights, as well as relevant movements and moments for Black and Latina Women (which focused more on topics like Eugenics and access to health care), into a chronological list. Having arrived at PEP with limited prior knowledge about the history of the Reproductive Rights Movement this project quickly taught me a great deal in a short amount of time. I was very appreciative that I was learning about the experiences of upper-middle class white women while also hearing the drastically different stories of less privileged women. This was an ongoing project that I continued to come back to right up the last days of my internship.

Many of the other activities I helped Eshanda with were connected to the Technical Assistance Program (TAP) that PEP was launching. PEP has recently published the findings of their She Speaks research campaign, which had sought out first hand information from young American women of color about their experiences with reproductive rights, health and justice. TAP provides other organizations with tools developed from the findings of the She Speaks campaign to help them communicate with young women of color about reproductive issues. One of the main tools to come out of the She Speaks research was the Recognize! advertising campaign. Recognize! is collection of three beautiful, powerful images that send messages of health and empowerment to young women of color in the form of posters, buttons, stickers, postcards and tattoos. Using the She Speaks findings PEP also developed techniques that can be taught to and used by other youth group facilitators to engage young people. PEP is still in the early stages of this part of the TAP. Communicating with organizations that might be interested in participating with the TAP was a main part of my internship position.

While PEP has relationships with many organizations around the country, the staff felt that PEP had ought to build stronger partnerships with local groups in the New York Metropolitan Area. Eshanda asked that I explore the vast network of organizations in New York that work with young people who might be interested in working with PEP, and then

put my findings into a spreadsheet. I must admit that I had trouble with this assignment. It was one of the first things I worked upon arriving and at the time I knew of very few organizations that fit this description. As a result I spent a lot of time searching the Internet without a perfectly clear idea of which groups I should be selecting or eliminating. I ended up with a very extensive table of all sorts of youth, medical and women's groups in New York City, but the organizations that were eventually contacted came mostly from suggestions made by the staff rather than my search.

I was responsible for the creation and dissemination of a number of surveys designed to gather information from other organizations about their experience with PEP. One survey was directed to about eight organizations that had been received free trial packages of the Recognize! materials. These "year long users" as they were called, had agreed to provide PEP with feedback on the materials in exchange for their use. At the time that Eshanda and I produced the survey, the "year long users" had been working with the Recognize! materials for six months. I collected responses, and compiled them into quantitative and qualitative tables. This project was left partially unfinished at the time of my departure, but the responses I saw were positively glowing. Eshanda and I also created a "potential partner" survey, designed to determine the needs and nature of organizations that work with young people, and to gauge their interest in working with PEP in the future. This survey was just being mailed out when I left, so I was not able to view the results.

This summer PEP accepted eight new members to their Young Women's Leadership Council. The Council is a group of females, between the ages of 18 and 29, which "advises PEP on programming and outreach efforts to ensure that the interests and voices of young women are reflected in all of the Project's activities". Meredith Esser was responsible for the recruitment and application review process. I assisted Meredith with the administrative tasks needed to complete this large project, such as photocopying applications and making trips to the post office. Like all of the staff, I read over applications and gave my input. During phone interview with the final candidates I took notes. (This was one of the things I

was able to do from home, thanks to the flexibility PEP allowed me.)

In early August PEP held their bi-annual convening for their Young Women's Leadership Council. Although I left just before the convening took place, I was very involved in its preparation. One example of the many ways in which the staff at PEP made me feel like an individual and not just a summer intern passing through, was the way in which they acknowledged my interests; having noticed that I enjoyed arts and crafts type activities, Meredith asked if I would make name tags for everyone attending the convening. Such gestures were common at PEP; because we worked in such close intimate quarters, I got to know the staff very well during my time there. New York City can be an overwhelming and lonely place. My time spent with my coworkers outside of work made my summer in New York much more enjoyable than it would have been otherwise. I was even extended an open invitation to stay with one of my coworkers at her apartment in Brooklyn, which I took her up on when traveling home to the Bronx was very inconvenient. I had no expectations of such wonderful camaraderie, but I am so grateful that it developed.)

Other projects that I worked on with Meredith included an update of PEP's ProtectChoice.org website. I wrote and designed a question and answer page about common reproductive rights inquiries among young women. Mondays were my designated day to contribute to the Protect Choice blog. After a few weeks at PEP I decided to compile all of the eye-opening information I was learning into a email newsletter and send it on to all of my female friends, family and colleagues. I got many positive responses from friends who said they would be passing on the information or taking some sort of action.

Because the atmosphere in PEP's office was so supportive I felt that I was able to suggest ideas and carry out projects of my own design, in spite of only being a temporary, student staff member. Knowing that PEP's current focus was on outreaching to young women of color and the adults that work with them, I thought that a high school would be a perfect place to connect with. I still have very close ties to my alma mater, Dover High School, which is located about 1.5 hours north of Manhattan. Dover is a rural community

that is undergoing a great deal of growth and change. Historically a relatively homogenous, white community, in recent years many African American and Latino residents have been moving to Dover. Aware of this shift in the local demographics, and also aware that the Dover Union Free School District is fortunate to have an open-minded school board that has declined Abstinence-Only Federal Funding, I began exploring ways that PEP and Dover High School might be able to work together. With the approval of Aimee at PEP, I contacted the Dover Union Free School District superintendent and board, and requested an audience at a board meeting. I went to the meeting with no specific request, but more of a desire to present PEP to the board as a possible district resource. I explained the nature of PEP's recent campaign, as well as their history of working with all young women around the issue of reproductive health. I suggested that having staff and faculty (such as guidance counselors, health teachers and school nurses) do a workshop with PEP to learn how young women of color view reproductive issues, could be very valuable considering the unfolding changes in the Dover student body demographics. I must admit that speaking before the board about this topic was a great personal challenge. Dover is a very Catholic town, and many of the board members are also active in the local parish. I had personal connections to nearly every person on the board and I was worried that talking about comprehensive sexual education would change how they saw me or upset them personally. They asked many questions and though some seemed to express slight hesitation, the overall response was very positive. No final decision was reached that night, but I left the meeting feeling as though something had been accomplished. A few days later I received word that the Dover School District was in fact willing and interested in working with PEP. I am very pleased with the decision, and terribly excited to see what would develop between the two parties. I have never worked in an environment where I have felt so comfortable acknowledging my personal needs, and knowing that the administration would be receptive to what I had to say. Late in the summer I had to do just this. The schedule I was keeping, which included four days at PEP and two days of work on the weekend, began to burn me out. I spoke with

Aimee and Eshanda about the difficulty I was having with the commute from home and the stay in the Bronx. They were very sympathetic and said that as long as Johanna Rincon and the staff at the Civil Liberties and Public Policy office were OK with a change in schedule, they would not mind if I worked from home on Thursday. I finished the last three weeks of my internship this way, which I greatly appreciated.

When people have asked me how my summer was, I tell them without hesitation that it was great. I usually follow that up that statement by saying that it was busy and challenging, and there may have been fleeting moments when I wished I had gotten a local waitressing job so that I could have spent a little more time swimming. But the bottom line is that I grew so much this summer. I developed my opinions about issues of reproduction and race, and I learned to respectfully share these views without fear or shame. I became familiar with the non-profit sector and movement work. I learned to negotiate the New York City public transportation system, I got to know my neighbors on Beaumont Avenue in the Bronx, and I managed my money while living in one of the most expensive cities on earth. I worked with amazing women, who spend their days fighting to educate and protect the rights of young women. This process of learning did not stop on my last day at PEP, as now I am exploring how to integrate all of these new experiences into my daily life, and future academic and career goals. I am so grateful for the unusual opportunity I had this summer through the RRASC grant program and I hope the work I did contributed in some way to the essential fight for reproductive freedom.