



Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps Intern Report

Lani Blechman, Summer '06
Class Action
Hadley, Massachusetts

I started at Class Action on May 29th working off-site. This I did for the first week because Class Action coordinated an intern/volunteer on-site organization for the following week. I had been in contact with Felice Yeskel, Co-Director, and received assignments and direction for my offsite work. The on-site orientation lasted 5 hours but was relatively relaxed and a helpful introduction to the other staff members, the organization, and upcoming projects. In addition to my beginning at Class Action, Cara Sharpes an intern and student at Smith was also beginning her work and Jessica Smyser was hired as administrative assistant just days before.

Transition into the organization has been casual and only a slight bit confusing. With Cara, Jessica, and I coming on to the Class Action team, we doubled the office staff. So the three of us have all been familiarizing ourselves with the organization, picking up on old projects, and starting new ones.

Jessica Smyser and I are the only two that are in the office full-time. Cara is a part time intern, Managing Director Dana Gillette works part time, Co-Directors Jenny Ladd and Felice Yeskel have been involved in a fair bit of travel and off-site work, and Senior Fellow Chuck Collins is currently working out of Oaxaca (I believe).

The most challenging part, therefore, has been figuring out to whom to report to on what. As the projects that I have been involved in span the different areas of work at Class Action it has been a bit confusing, but I am hopefully resolving this by reporting to everyone on everything—mass emails are great! I was first alerted to this problem when I discovered that a few projects that I had assumed were being duplicated by a Boston-based volunteer, but the two of us resolved this by deciding to work together and split up the tasks amongst ourselves.

Said volunteer Shannon and I are finding it easy to work together, relying heavily on email as she is only in the office once a week. And Cara, my fellow intern, and I have found that we work together well, so we have been assisting each other on projects and working together on others. Jessica is the main person that I report to and we usually share a room, so this has not been difficult. I have assisted her on administrative projects and she has been helpful in keeping a keen eye out for helpful research. The rest of the staff I have found willing to offer input when asked.

Transitioning into working at Class Action did take a little longer than I expected, however. It's not like working at CLPP exactly. Not only are there walls separating most of us, but everyone has very different schedules and I didn't feel an immediate connection to everyone as I did at CLPP. A staff picnic on the floor of one of the offices last week, however, was very helpful, and I feel that most of the disconnect that I felt immediately has

been resolved. We have weekly staff meetings where we check in on projects and give each other feedback, and these have also been helpful.

The organization was a little less grassroots than I expected. As it strives to be a national organization with such a small staff, I can see how things can easily get spread pretty thin. The main thing that struck me was the on the surface lack of local community involvement. This was also because the majority of the local community work that Class Action does is support groups for straddlers and for people with wealth, and these groups remain relatively anonymous. As my work at CLPP relied heavily on active work with a large group of people, my work at Class Action has been a tad-bit lonely. This has given me more of an opportunity, however, to work closely with Cara and Shannon, and I'm excited about the community work that I have to look forward to during the rest of the summer here at Class Action.

Moving to Northampton was an easy transition. The best part of which has been my close access to the bike path! Most days I bike to work, which is so great. I've also been able to go to NYC and Boston on some weekends, which are welcome trips. And summertime in the Pioneer Valley has offered other wonderful non-school year activities, like the farmers' market, Peddle people weekly bike parade, and lots of swimming.

Administrative Projects:

Part of my internship at Class Action has included administrative assistance. This has included sending faxes, making copies, forwarding documents, and things of that nature in order to assist the directors and administrative assistant. For the most part, these tasks have been few and far between, so as to not make me feel like a go-to girl by any means. The Administrative Assistant and I also did some furniture rearranging in order to accommodate the doubling of the office staff, and that was fun (I'm trying to replace Eesha's talent for interior design!). The largest administrative tasks that I have been involved in were bulk mailings.

The first project I completed with the other summer intern, Cara Sharpes from Smith College. The two of us addressed and stuffed a couple hundred letters informing Class Action supporters of a transition of the Co-director, Jennifer Ladd who will be going on sabbatical for a few months and will return as a Staff Associate which means that her fellow Co-Director Felice Yeskel will be assuming the position of Executive Director.

The second project that I assisted with was an Appeal. This involved stuffing, addressing, and stamping a couple thousand letters requesting monetary and volunteer support from the greater Class Action constituency (previous donors, workshop participants, and any one who made it into the address database). All of the staff at Class Action have been involved in different parts of this process, and for my part I stuffed, addressed, and stamped along side of the administrative assistant and a group of volunteers. I also helped recruit volunteers for this process. We should be completely finished with the mailing today!

Website Development:

I am involved with a few on-going projects regarding website development. I have been reviewing the current resources on the Class Action website to make sure that they are providing up to date information and that all links are still valid. I have also created a database with all of the organizations listed on the website and have been contacting these orgs requesting that they add a link to the Class Action website on their web pages as well. In addition, I have been researching new resources for the website and checking for consistency of language on the website.

Programming Projects:

One of the first projects that I began working on before I started working on site was researching potential contributors for a forth-coming issue of Equality & Excellence in Education, a journal produced at U-Mass. Class Action is guest editing an edition that will be entirely devoted to issues related to class and education. For my part, I located over 80 different potential contributors and sent them a "Call for Submissions". I kept careful documentation so that this list could be possibly used in the future for projects relating to education at Class Action.

Another project that I began working on straightaway was locating recently published books for possible review and addition to the Class Action Lending Library. I created a database in File Maker Pro. (I had to figure out how to use the program first—and I must say, I felt mighty accomplished learning to navigate a complex database program virtually on my own!) Over the last month I have identified over one hundred recently published books related to class and entered relevant information into the database. From this database, I can keep track of which publishers I have contacted (and how recently) requesting Review Copies for future use by Class Action and in order to be added to the Lending Library.

The Lending Library has been a further on-going project. I edited an existing database to fit the needs of the Class Action Lending Library and began documenting the books that we currently have for loan. I am in the process of entering all of the books and organizing them for accessibility by topic. This process has been fun and a bit grueling, but I took it on willingly, and it's great to be aware of what sort of resources available (although my personal "To Read" list has grown tremendously). The staff has offered support and advice on this project and we are considering sending out a call for volunteers to assist in the database entry process. As the database is fairly thorough with space to enter the table of contents of each book for research purposes, thoroughly entering the information takes some time.

Class Action sends out a monthly E-news informing those on the mailing list of current projects and developments at Class Action and providing resources on a particular theme regarding class. For July the theme was "Class and Leisure" and I assisted fellow Intern Cara by editing and reviewing the work that she did for the E-news.

The August E-news is focusing on "Immigration and Class", and I am spear-heading this project. This entails research on current books that relate to the topic, a few book reviews, research on recent related articles (news and otherwise), and suggested actions on raising awareness/dismantling classism in the Immigration debate. I am currently in the middle of this project. I have received adequate support from the Class Action staff in the form of guidance and suggestions. All of the staff have been on the look out for relevant articles. We have isolated two books to reviews, and a volunteer who works closely with us has taken on the task of reviewing one of the books, *Human Cargo* by Caroline Moorehead. I reviewed a children's book.

Intern Cara Sharpes and I have been working on starting a summer reading/discussion group on class. The first meeting will be July 18th with subsequent meetings every 2 weeks until the end of August. We have identified a diverse but fairly concise packet of readings on various issues including women's experience with poverty, structural racism causing wealth inequalities, micro economic causes of inequality, and dealing with privilege/wealth and social justice. We are currently working on getting the word out and preparing possible discussion topics for the first meeting.

Cara is the head of SACA, a student group at Smith College devoted to class activism. Felice Yeskel, Class Action Director, and Cara are interested in organizing a Pioneer Valley conference on class. Cara and I have started some initial brain storming and organizing for a spring conference. Hopefully this project will develop more fully over the summer.

I am also working on starting a Class Action zine. The intention behind this project is that it will be a regular publication that will bring Class Action into the national zine community and bring Class Action constituents familiarity with zines. It will also be an accessible forum for learning about class and a way for people to have their voices heard. For the first issue I am focusing rather broadly on "what is class" and the staff is assisting me in sending out a call for submissions. The deadline for submissions is July 21st and I hope to have a final product by the second week of August. By the end of my time here I expect to have some materials ready for a second issue centered on a more specific theme.

The 2nd Birthday Celebration Picnic of Class Action will be held on July 12th at Look Park. All of the staff has been involved in this project, and for my part, I have been named Game Czar. In preparation for the celebration I have assisted with the distribution of the invitation/flyer, and I have researched fun/non-competitive games to play with the kids and those young at heart at the picnic.

Final Report

My time at Class Action allowed me to work on a great many independent projects. Many of the projects that I began early in the summer, I continued throughout my internship. The library organization was well under way by my last day, and I made sure to leave the proper materials in order to continue work on website development and the database of recently published books about class.

The reading and discussion group, Breaking Taboos, that fellow intern Cara and I organized, met four times over the summer. We were able to cover a great wealth of materials and open up the direction of topics covered to participants. We read materials relating to class and race, class and feminism, class and queer issues, and class and health. This included selections from bell hooks *Where we stand: class matters*, short stories by Dorothy Allison, New York Times journalism on class and health, among others.

This organizing experience offered new challenges as the pool of participants was drawn from the larger community (not just a college campus). Most of the participants, however, were students or recent grads and I think this left the non-student contingent on their guard slightly.

Summer seemed also a difficult time for this project. Schedules are more lenient in the summer, and the routine of a bi-monthly reading group did not fit exactly with all of the participants. Although participation was not consistent, community interest in the group was. Each week I would receive emails and calls from new folks who wanted to get involved.

As for the Class Action zine, I very much enjoyed working on this project. I received submissions from a very diverse group of people. Working on the zine in the role of an editor (instead of lone author) allowed me to access a whole different type of community. Although it was largely relegated to electronic communication, I got to work with people very involved in the current zine community, some who were merely familiar, and still

others who were interested in participating in a different form of communication. Once I compiled all of the submissions, I spread out in the Class Action Library/Conference Room and set to work cutting apart and glueing the materials together—synthesizing this wealth of information and experiences with class in a visual form. The zine turned out to be much larger than I originally intended, but I had trouble not including everything. Working on this project also allowed me to engage in cohesive thinking about class and classism, and it also allowed me the space to connect my reproductive justice work to my work at Class Action.